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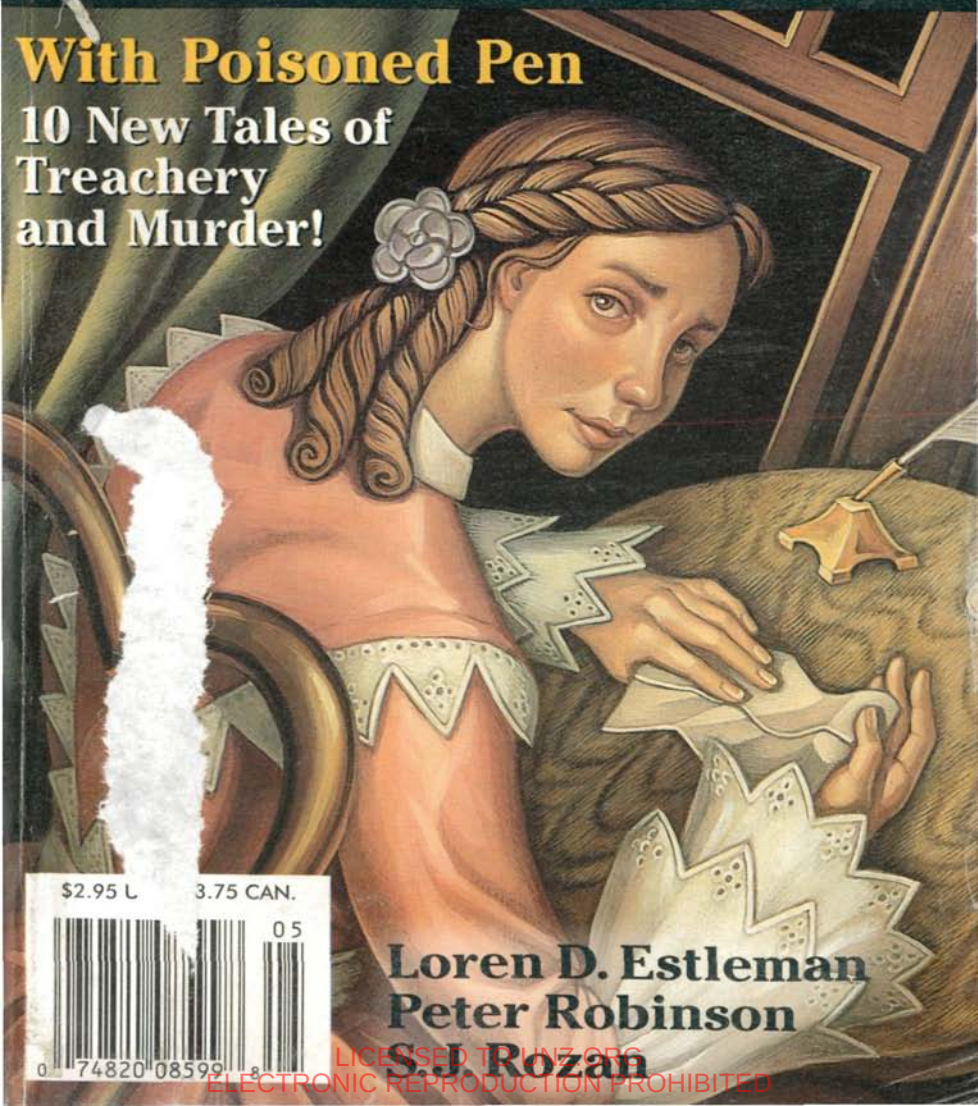

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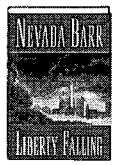

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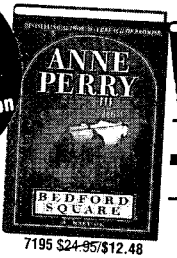

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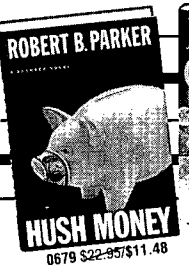

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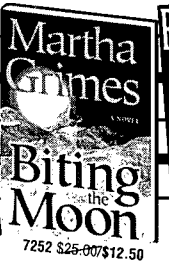

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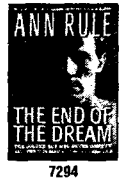

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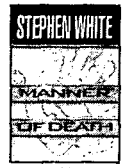

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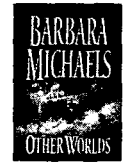

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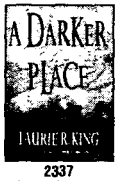

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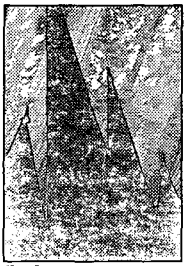

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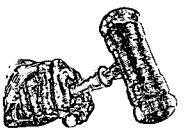

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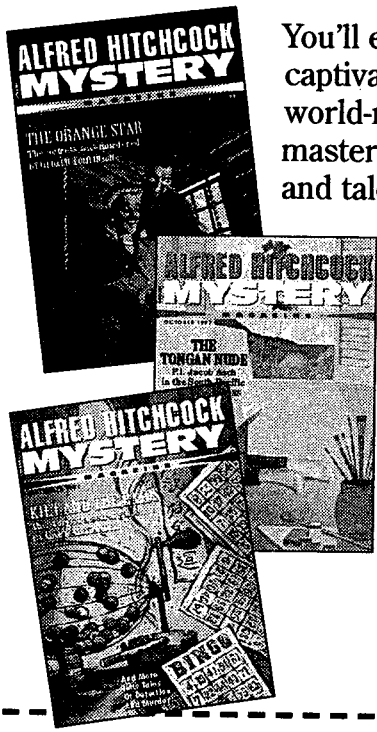

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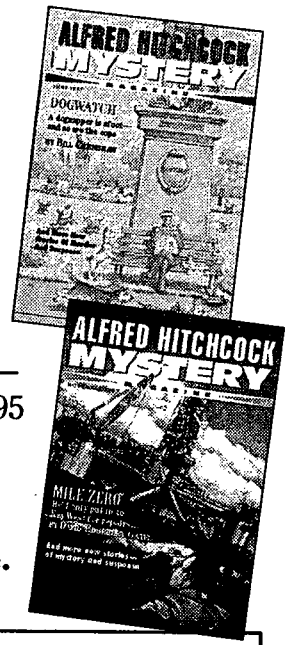

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IN FLANDERS FIELDS

by Peter Robinson

I considered it the absolute epitome of irony that, with bombs falling around us, someone went and bludgeoned Mad Maggie to death.

To add insult to injury, she lay undiscovered for several days before Harry Fletcher, the milkman, found her. Because milk was rationed to one or two pints a week, depending on how much the children and expectant mothers needed, he didn't leave it on her doorstep the way he used to do before the war. Even in a close community like ours, a bottle of milk left unguarded on a doorstep wouldn't have lasted five minutes.

These days, Harry walked around with his float, and people came out to buy. It was convenient, as we were some way from the nearest shops, and we could always be sure we were getting fresh milk. However mad Maggie may have been, it wasn't like her to miss her milk ration. Thinking she might have slept in, or perhaps have fallen ill with no one to look after her, Harry knocked on her door and called her name. When he heard no answer, he told me, he made a tentative try at the handle and found that the door was unlocked.

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There she lay on her living-room floor in a pool of dried blood dotted with flies. Poor Harry lost his breakfast before he could dash outside for air.

Why Harry came straight to me when he found Mad Maggie's body I can't say. We were friends of a kind, I suppose, of much the same age, and we occasionally passed a pleasurable evening together playing dominoes and drinking watery beer in the Prince Albert. Other than that, we didn't have a lot in common: I was a schoolteacher—English and history—and Harry had left school at fourteen; Harry had missed the first war through a heart ailment, whereas I had been gassed at Ypres in 1917; I was a bachelor, and Harry was married with a stepson, Thomas, who had just come back home on convalescent leave after being severely wounded at the Dunkirk evacuation. Thomas also happened to be my godson, which I suppose was the main thing Harry and I had in common.

"In Flanders Fields" was written for *Not Safe After Dark*, a collection of Peter Robinson stories recently published by Crippen & Landru Publishers, P.O. Box 9315, Norfolk, VA 23505. In reprinting the story *EQMM* pays tribute to the publishers, in thanks for their anthologizing of the work of so many of our fine short story writers. ¶

Perhaps Harry also came to me because I was a Special Constable. I know it sounds impressive, but it wasn't really. The services were so mixed up that you'd have the police putting out fires, the Home Guard doing police work, and anyone with two arms carrying the stretchers. A Special Constable was simply a part-time policeman, without any real qualifications for the job except his willingness to take it on. The rest of the time I taught what few pupils remained at Silverhill Grammar School.

As it turned out, I was glad that Harry did call on me, because it gave me a stake in the matter. The regular police were far more concerned with lighting offences and the black market than they were with their regular duties, and one thing nobody had time to do in the war was investigate the murder of a mad, mysterious, cantankerous old woman.

Nobody except me, that is.

Though my position didn't grant me any special powers, I pride myself on being an intelligent and perceptive sort of fellow, not to mention nosy, and it wasn't the first time I'd done a spot of detective work on the side. But first, let me tell you a little about Mad Maggie . . .

I say *old* woman, but Maggie was probably only in her mid forties, about the same age as me, when she was killed. Everyone just

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called her *old;* it seemed to go with *mad.* With a certain kind of woman, it's not so much a matter of years, anyway, but of demeanour, and Maggie's demeanour was old.

Take the clothes she wore, for a start: Most women were trying to look like one of the popular film stars like Vivien Leigh or Deanna Durbin, with her bolero dresses, but even for a woman of her age, Maggie wore clothes that could best be described as old-fashioned, even antique: high, buttoned boots, long dresses with high collars, ground-sweeping cloaks, and broad-brimmed hats with feathers.

Needless to say, the local kids—at least those whose parents hadn't packed them off to the countryside already—used to follow her down the street in gangs and chant, "Mad Maggie, Mad Maggie, she's so mad, her brain's all claggy . . ." Children can be so cruel. Most of the time she ignored them, or seemed oblivious to their taunts, but once in awhile she wheeled on them, eyes blazing, and started waving her arms around and yelling curses, usually in French. The children would squeal with exaggerated horror, then turn tail and run away.

Maggie never had any visitors; none of us had ever been inside her house; nobody in the community even knew what her real name was, where she had come from, or how she had got to be the way she was. We simply accepted her. There were rumours, of course. Some gossipmongers had it that she was an heiress cut off by her family because she went mad; others said she had never recovered from a tragic love affair; still others said she was a rich eccentric and kept thousands of pounds stuffed in her mattress.

Whoever and whatever Mad Maggie was, she managed to take care of life's minutiae somehow; she paid her rent, she bought newspapers, and she handled her ration coupons just like the rest of us. She also kept herself clean, despite the restriction to only five inches of bathwater. Perhaps her eccentricity was just an act, then, calculated to put people off befriending her for some reason? Perhaps she was shy or antisocial? All in all, she was known as Mad Maggie only because she never talked to anyone except herself, because of the old clothes she wore, because of her strange outbursts in French, and because, as everyone knew, she never went to the shelters during air raids but would either stay indoors alone or walk the blacked-out streets muttering and arguing with herself, waving her arms at the skies as if inviting the bombs to come and get her.

When Harry called that Monday morning, I was lying in bed grappling with one of my frequent bouts of insomnia, waiting for the birds to sing me back to sleep. I couldn't even tell if it was daylight or not because of the heavy blackout curtains. I had been dreaming, I remembered, and had woken at about half-past four,

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gasping for air, from my recurring nightmare about being sucked down into a quicksand.

I heard Harry banging at my door and calling my name, so I threw on some clothes and hurried downstairs. I thought at first that it might be something to do with Tommy, but when I saw his pale face, his wide eyes, and the thin trickle of vomit at the corner of his mouth, I worried that he was having the heart attack he had been expecting daily for over twenty years.

He turned and pointed down the street. "Frank, please!" he said. "You've got to come with me."

I could hear the fear in his voice, so I followed him as quickly as I could to Maggie's house. It was a fine October morning, with a hint of autumn's nip in the air. He had left the door ajar. Slowly, I pushed it open and went inside. My first impression was more surprise at how clean and tidy the place was than shock at the bloody figure on the carpet. In my defence, lest I sound callous, I had fought in the first war and, by some miracle, survived the mustard gas with only a few blisters and a nasty coughing fit every now and then. But I had seen men blown apart; I had been spattered with the brains of my friends; I had crawled through trenches and not known whether the soft, warm, gelatinous stuff I was putting my hands in was mud or the entrails of my comrades. More recently, I had also helped dig more than one mangled or dismembered body from the ruins, so a little blood, a little death, never bothered me much. Besides, despite the pool of dried blood around her head, Mad Maggie looked relatively peaceful. More peaceful than I had ever seen her in life.

Funny, but it reminded me of that old Dracula film I saw at the Crown, the one with Bela Lugosi. The count's victims always became serene after they had wooden stakes plunged through their hearts. Mad Maggie hadn't been a vampire, and she didn't have a stake through her heart, but a bloodstained posser lay by her side, the concave copper head and wooden handle both covered in blood. A quick glance in the kitchen showed only one puzzling item: an unopened bottle of milk. As far as I knew, Harry's last round had been the morning of the air raid, last Wednesday. I doubted that Maggie would have been able to get more than her rations; besides, the bottle top bore the unmistakable mark of the dairy where Harry worked.

Harry waited outside, unwilling to come in and face the scene again. Once I had taken in what had happened, I told him to fetch the police, the real police this time.

They came.

And they went.

One was a plainclothes officer, Detective Sergeant Longbottom,

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a dull-looking bruiser with a pronounced limp, who looked most annoyed at being called from his bed. He asked a few questions, sniffed around a bit, then got the ambulance men to take Maggie away on a stretcher.

One of the questions Sergeant Longbottom asked was the victim's name. I told him that, apart from "Mad Maggie," I had no idea. With a grunt, he rummaged around in the sideboard drawer and found her rent book. I was surprised to discover that she was called Rose Faversham, which I thought was actually quite a pretty name. Prettier than Mad Maggie, anyway. Sergeant Longbottom also asked if we'd had any strangers in the area. Apart from an army unit billeted near the park, where they were carrying out training exercises, and the Gypsy encampment in Silverhill Woods, we hadn't.

"Ah, Gypsies," he said, and wrote something in his little black notebook. "Is anything missing?"

I told him I didn't know, as I had no idea what might have been here in the first place. That seemed to confuse him. For all I knew, I went on, the rumour might have been right, and she could have had a mattress stuffed with banknotes. Sergeant Longbottom checked upstairs and came back scratching his head. "Everything looks normal," he said, then he poked around a bit more, noting the canteen of sterling-silver cutlery, and guessed that Mad Maggie had probably interrupted the thief, who had killed her and fled the scene—probably back to the Gypsy encampment. I was on the point of telling him that I thought the Nazis were supposed to be persecuting Gypsies, not us, but I held my tongue. I knew it would do no good.

Of course, I told him how everyone in the neighborhood knew Mad Maggie paid no attention to air raids, how she even seemed to enjoy them the way some people love thunderstorms, and how Tom Sellers, the ARP man, had remonstrated with her on many occasions, only to get a dismissive wave and the sight of her ramrod-stiff back walking away down the street. Maggie had also been fined more than once for blackout infringements, until she solved that one by keeping her heavy black curtains closed night and day.

I also told Longbottom that, in the blackout, anyone could have come and gone easily without being seen. I think that was what finally did it. He hummed and hawed, muttered, "Gypsies," again, made noises about a continuing investigation, then put his little black notebook away, said he had pressing duties to attend to, and left.

We never saw him in our street again.

And there things would have remained had I not become curious. No doubt Mad Maggie would have been fast forgotten and some poor, innocent Gypsy would have been strung up from the gallows.

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But there was something about the serenity of Mad Maggie's features in death that haunted me. She looked almost saintlike, as if she had sloughed off the skin of despair and madness that she had inhabited for so long and reverted to the loving, compassionate Christian woman she must have once been. She had a real name now, too: Rose Faversham. I was also provoked by Detective Sergeant Longbottom's gruff manner and his obvious impatience with the whole matter. No doubt he had more important duties to get back to, such as the increased traffic in black-market onion substitutes.

I would like to say that the police searched Maggie's house thoroughly, locked it up fast, and put a guard on the door, but they did nothing of the kind. They did lock the front door behind us, of course, but that was it. I imagined that, as soon as he found out, old Grasper, the landlord, would slither around, rubbing his hands and trying to rent the place out quickly again, for twice as much, before the army requisitioned it as a billet.

One thing I had neglected to tell Detective Sergeant Longbottom, I realized as I watched his car disappear around a pile of rubble at the street corner, was about Fingers Finnegan, our local black marketeer and petty thief. Human nature is boundlessly selfish and greedy, even in wartime, and air raids provided the perfect cover for burglary and black-market deals. The only unofficial people on the streets during air raids were either mad, like Maggie, or up to no good, like Fingers. We'd had a spate of burglaries when most decent, law-abiding people were in St. Mary's church crypt, or at least in their damp and smelly backyard Anderson shelters, and Fingers was my chief suspect. He could be elusive when he wanted to be, though, and I hadn't seen him in a number of days.

Not since last Wednesday's air raid, in fact.

After the police had gone, Harry and I adjourned to my house, where, despite the early hour, I poured him a stiff brandy and offered him a Woodbine. I didn't smoke, myself, because of that little bit of gas that had leaked through my mask at Ypres, but I had soon discovered that it was wise to keep cigarettes around when they were becoming scarce. Like some of the rationed items, they became a kind of currency. I also put the kettle on, for I hadn't had my morning tea yet, and I'm never at my best before my morning tea. Perhaps that may be one reason I have never married; most of the women I have met chatter far too much in the morning.

"What a turn-up," Harry said, after taking a swig and coughing. "Mad Maggie, murdered. Who'd imagine it?"

"Her killer, I should think," I said.

"Gypsies."

I shook my head. "I doubt it. Oh, there's no doubt they're a

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shifty lot. I wouldn't trust one of them as far as I could throw him. But killers? A defenceless woman like Maggie? I don't think so. Besides, you saw her house. It hadn't been touched."

"But Sergeant Longbottom said she might have interrupted a burglar."

I sniffed. "Sergeant Longbottom's an idiot. There was no evidence at all that her killer was attempting to burgle the place."

"Maybe she was one of them once—a Gypsy—and they came to take her back?"

I laughed. "I must say, Harry, you certainly don't lack imagination, I'll grant you that. But no, I rather fancy this is a different sort of matter altogether."

Harry frowned. "You're not off on one of your Sherlock Holmes kicks again, are you, Frank? Leave it be. Let the professionals deal with it. It's what they're paid for."

"Professionals! Hmph. You saw for yourself how interested our Detective Sergeant Longbottom was. Interested in crawling back in his bed, more like it. No, Harry, I think that's the last we've seen of them. If we want to find out who killed poor Maggie, we'll have to find out for ourselves."

"Why not just let it be, Frank?" Harry pleaded. "We're at war. People are getting killed every minute of the day and night."

I gave him a hard look, and he cringed a little. "Because this is different, Harry. While I can't say I approve of war as a solution to man's problems, at least it's socially-sanctioned murder. If the government, in all its wisdom, decides that we're at war with Germany and we should kill as many Germans as we can, then so be it. But nobody sanctioned the killing of Mad Maggie. When an individual kills someone like Maggie, he takes something he has no right to. Something he can't even give back or replace, the way he could a diamond necklace. It's an affront to us all, Harry, an insult to the community. And it's up to us to see that retribution is made." I'll admit I sounded a little pompous, but Harry could be extremely obtuse on occasion, and his using the war as an excuse for so outrageous a deed as Rose's murder brought out the worst in me.

Harry seemed suitably cowed by my tirade, and when he'd finished his brandy he shuffled off to finish his deliveries. I never did ask him whether there was any milk left on his unattended float.

I had another hour in which to enjoy my morning tea before I had to leave for school, but first I had to complete my ritual and drop by the newsagent's for a paper. While I was there, I asked Mrs. Hope behind the counter when she had last seen Mad Maggie. Last Wednesday, she told me, walking down the street towards her house just before the warning siren went off, muttering to herself. That information, along with the unopened milk and the gen-

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eral state of the body, was enough to confirm for me that Rose had probably been killed under cover of the air raid.

That morning, I found I could neither concentrate on *Othello,* which I was supposed to be teaching the fifth form, nor could I be bothered to read about the bombing raids, evacuation procedures, and government pronouncements that passed for news in these days of propaganda and censorship.

Instead, I thought about Mad Maggie, or Rose Faversham, as she had now become for me. When I tried to visualize her as she was alive, I realized that had I looked closely enough, had I got beyond the grim expressions and the muttered curses, I might have seen her for the handsome woman she was. *Handsome,* I say, not pretty or beautiful, but I would hazard a guess that twenty years ago she would have turned a head or two. Then I remembered that it was about twenty years ago when she first arrived in the neighbourhood, and she had been Mad Maggie right from the start. So perhaps I was inventing a life for her, a life she had never had, but certainly when death brought repose to her features, it possessed her of a beauty I had not noticed before.

When I set off for school, I saw Tommy Markham, Harry's stepson, going for his morning constitutional. Tommy's real dad, Lawrence Markham, had been my best friend. We had grown up together and had both fought in the Third Battle of Ypres, between August and November of 1917. Lawrence had been killed at Passchendaele, about nine miles away from my unit, while I had only been mildly gassed. Tommy was in his mid twenties now. He never knew his real dad, but worshipped him in a way you can worship only a dead hero. Tommy joined up early and served with the Green Howards as part of the ill-fated British Expeditionary Force in France. He had seemed rather twitchy and sullen since he got back from the hospital last week, but I put that down to shattered nerves. The doctors had told Polly, his mother, something about nervous exhaustion and about being patient with him.

"Morning, Tommy," I greeted him.

He hadn't noticed me at first—his eyes had been glued to the pavement as he walked—but when he looked up, startled, I noticed the almost pellucid paleness of his skin and the dark bruises under his eyes.

"Oh, good morning, Mr. Bascombe," he said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, but you don't look so good. What is it?"

"My nerves," he said, moving away as he spoke. "The doc said I'd be all right after a bit of rest, though."

"I'm glad to hear it. By the way, did your fath—, sorry, did Harry tell you about Mad Maggie?" I knew Tommy was sensitive about Harry not being his real father.

"He said she was dead, that's all. Says someone clobbered her."

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"When did you last see her, Tommy?"

"I don't know."

"Since the raid?"

"That was the day after I got back. No, come to think of it, I don't think I have seen her since then. Terrible business, in'it?"

"Yes, it is."

"Anyway, sorry, must dash. Bye, Mr. Bascombe."

"Bye, Tommy."

I stood frowning and watched him scurry off, almost crabwise, down the street.

There was another air raid that night, and I decided to look for Fingers Finnegan. By then, I had talked to enough people on the street to be certain that no one had seen Rose since the evening of the last raid.

We lived down by the railway, the canal, and the power station, so we were always copping for it. The Luftwaffe could never aim accurately, though, because the power station sent up clouds of appalling smoke as soon as they heard there were enemy planes approaching. If the bombs hit anything of strategic value, it was more by good luck than good management.

The siren would go off, wailing up and down the scale for two minutes, and it soon became a sort of eerie fugue as you heard the sirens from neighbouring boroughs join in, one after another. The noise frightened the dogs and cats, and they struck up wailing and howling, too. At first, you could hardly see a thing outside, only hear the droning of the bombers high above and the swishing and whistling sound of the bombs as they fell in the distance. Then came the explosions, the hailstone of incendiaries on roofs like a rain of fire, the flames crackling, blazing through the smoke. Even the sounds seemed muffled, the distant explosions no more than dull, flat thuds, like a heavy book falling on the floor, the crackle of antiaircraft fire like fat spitting on a griddle. Sometimes you could even hear someone scream or shout out a warning. Once I heard a terrible shrieking that still haunts my nightmares.

But the city had an eldritch beauty during an air raid. In the distance, through the smoke-haze, the skyline seemed lit by a dozen suns, each a slightly different shade of red, orange, or yellow. Searchlights crisscrossed one another, making intricate cat's cradles in the air, and ack-ack fire arced into the sky like strings of Christmas lights. Soon, the bells of the fire engines also became part of the symphony of sound and colour.

The smoke from the power station got in my eyes and up my nose, and with my lungs, it brought on a coughing fit that seemed to shake my ribs free of their moorings. I held a handkerchief to my face, and that seemed to help a little.

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It wasn't too difficult to get around, despite the blackout and the smoke. There were white stripes painted on the lampposts and along the kerbside, and many people had put little dots of luminous paint on their doorbells, so you could tell where you were if you knew the neighbourhood well enough.

I walked along Lansdowne Street to the junction with Cardigan Road. Nobody was abroad. The bombs were distant but getting closer, and the smell from a broken sewage pipe was terrible, despite my handkerchief. Once, I fancied I saw a figure steal out of one of the houses, look this way and that, then disappear into the smoky darkness. I ran, calling out after him, but when I got there he had vanished. It was probably Fingers, I told myself. I'd have a devil of a time catching him now I had scared him off. My best chance was to run him down the next day in one of the backstreet cafes where he sold his stolen goods.

So instead of pursuing my futile task, and because it was getting more and more difficult to breathe, I decided that my investigation might next benefit best from a good look around Rose's empty house.

It was easy enough to gain access via the kitchen window at the back, which wasn't even latched, and after an undignified and painful fall from the sink to the floor, I managed to regain my equilibrium and set about my business. It occurred to me that if I had such an easy time getting in, then her killer would have had an easy time, too. Rose had been killed with the posser, which would most likely have been placed near the sink or tub in which she did her washing.

Because of the blackout curtains, I didn't have to worry about my torch giving me away; nor did I have to cover it with tissue paper, as I would outside, so I had plenty of light to see by. I stood for a few moments, adjusting to the room. I could hear fire-engine bells not too far away.

I found little of interest downstairs. Apart from necessities, such as cutlery, pans, plates, and dishes, Rose seemed to own nothing. There were no framed photographs on the mantelpiece, no paintings on the drab walls. There wasn't even a wireless. A search of the sideboard revealed only the rent-book that Longbottom had already discovered, a National Identity Card, also in the name of Rose Faversham, her ration book, various coupons, old bills, and about twenty pounds in banknotes. I did find two bottles of gin, one almost empty, in the lower half of the china cabinet. There were no letters, no address books, nothing of a personal nature. Rose Faversham's nest was clean and tidy, but it was also quite sterile.

Wondering whether it was worth bothering, I finally decided to go upstairs to finish my search. The first of the two bedrooms was completely bare. Most people use a spare room to store things they no longer use but can't bear to throw out just yet; there was noth-

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ing like this in Rose's spare bedroom, just some rather austere wallpaper and bare floorboards.

I felt a tremor of apprehension on entering Rose's bedroom. After all, she had lived such a private, self-contained life that any encroachment on her most intimate domain seemed a violation. Nonetheless, I went inside.

Apart from the ruffled bedclothes, which I assumed were the result of Detective Sergeant Longbottom's cursory search, the bedroom was every bit as neat, clean, and empty as the rest of the house. The one humanizing detail was a library book on her bedside table: Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh.* So Rose Faversham had been an educated woman. Butler's savage and ironic attack on Victorian values was hardly common bedtime reading on our street.

I looked under the mattress and under the bed, and found nothing. The dressing-table held those few items deemed essential for a woman's appearance and hygiene, and the chest of drawers revealed only stacks of carefully folded undergarments, corsets and the like, among which I had no desire to go probing. The long dresses hung in the wardrobe beside the high-buttoned blouses.

About to give up and head home to bed, I tried one last place—the top of the wardrobe, where I used to keep my secret diaries when I was a boy—and there I found the shoebox. Even a brief glance inside told me it was the repository of whatever past and personal memories Rose Faversham might have wanted to hang onto. Instead of sitting on the bedspread to read by torchlight, I went back downstairs and slipped out of the house like a thief in the night, which I suppose I was, with Rose's shoebox under my arm. A bomb exploded about half a mile away as I sidled down the street.

I should have gone to one of the shelters, I know, but I was feeling devil-may-care that night, and I certainly didn't want anyone to know I had broken into Rose's house and stolen her only private possessions. Back in my own humble abode, I made sure my curtains were shut tight, poured a large tumbler of brandy—perhaps, apart from nosiness and an inability to suffer fools gladly, my only vice—then turned on the standard lamp beside my armchair and settled down to examine my haul. There was a certain excitement in having pilfered it, as they say, and for a moment I imagined I had an inkling of that illicit thrill Fingers Finnegan must get every time *he* burgles someone's house. Of course, this was different; I hadn't broken into Rose's house for my own benefit, to line my own pockets, but to solve the mystery of her murder.

The first thing the shoebox yielded was a photograph of three smiling young women standing in front of an old van with a cross on its side. I could tell by their uniforms that they were nurses from the first war. On the back, in slightly smudged ink, someone

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had written, "Midge, Rose, and Margaret—Flanders, 30th July, 1917. Friends Inseparable Forever!"

I stared hard at the photograph and, though my imagination may have been playing tricks on me, I thought I recognized Rose as the one in the middle. She had perfect dimples at the edges of her smile, and her eyes gazed, pure and clear, directly into the lens. She bore little resemblance to the Rose I had known as Mad Maggie, or indeed to the body of Rose Faversham as I had seen it. But I think it was her.

I put the photograph aside and pulled out the next item. It was a book of poetry: *Severn and Somme* by Ivor Gurney. One of my favourite poets, Gurney was gassed at St. Julien, near Passchendaele, and sent to a war hospital near Edinburgh. I heard he later became mentally disturbed and suicidal, and he died just two or three years ago, after nearly twenty years of suffering. I have always regretted that we never met.

I opened the book. On the title page, someone had written, "To My Darling Rose on her 21st Birthday, 20th March, 1918. Love, Nicholas." So Rose was even younger than I had thought.

I set the book aside for a moment and rubbed my eyes. Sometimes I fancied the residual effects of the gas made them water, though my doctor assured me that it was a foolish notion, as mustard gas wasn't a lachrymator.

I hadn't been in the war as late as March, 1918. The injury that sent me to hospital in Manchester, my "blighty," took place the year before. Blistered and blinded, I had lain in bed there for months, unwilling to get up. The blindness passed, but the scarring remained, both inside and out. In the small hours, when I can't sleep, I relive those early days of August, 1917, in Flanders: the driving rain, the mud, the lice, the rats, the deafening explosions. It was madness. We were doomed from the start by incompetent leaders, and as we struggled waist-deep through mud, with shells and bullets flying all around us, we could only watch in hopeless acceptance as our own artillery sank in the mud, and our tanks followed it down.

Judging by the words on the back of the photograph, Rose had been there, too: *Rose,* one of the angels of mercy who tended the wounded and the dying in the trenches of Flanders' fields.

I opened the book. Nicholas, or Rose, had underlined the first few lines of the first poem, "To the Poet Before Battle":

> Now, youth, the hour of thy dread passion comes;
> Thy lovely things must all be laid away;
> And thou, as others, must face the riven day
> Unstirred by rattle of the rolling drums
> Or bugles' strident cry.

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Perhaps Nicholas had been a poet, and Gurney's call for courage in the face of impending battle applied to him, too? And if Nicholas had been a poet, was Rose one of the "lovely things" he had to set aside?

Outside, the all-clear sounded and brought me back to earth. I breathed a sigh of relief. Spared again. Still, I had been so absorbed in Rose's treasures that I probably wouldn't have heard a bomb if one fell next door. They say you never hear the one with your name on it.

I set the book down beside the photograph and dug around deeper in the shoebox. I found a medal of some sort—I think for valour in wartime nursing—and a number of official papers and certificates. Unfortunately, there were no personal letters. Even so, I managed to compile a list of names to seek out and one or two official addresses where I might pursue my enquiries into Rose Faversham's past. No time like the present, I thought, going over to my escritoire and taking out pen and paper.

I posted my letters early the following morning, when I went to fetch my newspaper. I had the day off from school, as the pupils were collecting aluminum pots and pans for the Spitfire Fund, so I thought I might slip into "Special Constable" mode and spend an hour or two scouring Fingers Finnegan's usual haunts.

I started at Frinton's, on the High Street, where I also treated myself to two rashers of bacon and an egg. By midmorning, I had made my way around most of the neighbouring cafes, and it was lunchtime when I arrived at Lyon's in the city centre. I didn't eat out very often, and twice a day was almost unheard of. Even so, I decided to spend one and threepence on roast beef and Yorkshire pudding. There was a lot of meat around then because the powers that be were slaughtering most of the farm animals to turn the land over to crops. I almost felt that I was doing my national duty by helping eat some before it went rotten.

As I waited, I noticed Finnegan slip in through the door in his usual manner, licking his lips, head half bowed, eyes flicking nervously around the room trying to seek out anyone who may have been after him, or to whom he may have owed money. I wasn't in uniform, and I was pretending to be absorbed in my newspaper, so his eyes slid over me. When he decided it was safe, he sat down three tables away from me.

My meal came, and I tucked in with great enthusiasm, managing to keep Finnegan in my peripheral vision. Shortly, another man came in—dark-haired, red-faced—and sat with Finnegan. The two of them put their heads together, all the time Finnegan's eyes flicking here and there, looking for danger signs. I pretended to pay no attention but was annoyed that I couldn't overhear a

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word. Something exchanged hands under the table, and the other man left: Finnegan fencing his stolen goods again.

I waited, lingering over my tea and rice pudding, and when Finnegan left, I followed him. I hadn't wanted to confront him in the restaurant and cause a scene, so I waited until we came near a ginnel not far from my own street, then I speeded up, grabbed him by the shoulders, and dragged him into it.

Finnegan was not very strong—in fact, he was a scrawny, sickly sort of fellow, which is why he wasn't fit for service—but he was slippery as an eel, and it took all my energy to hang onto him until I got him where I wanted him, with his back to the wall and my fists gripping his lapels. I slammed him against the wall a couple of times to take any remaining wind out of his sails, then when he went limp, I was ready to start.

"Bloody hell, Constable Bascombe!" he said when he'd got his breath back. "I didn't recognize you at first. You didn't have to do that, you know. If there's owt you want to know, why don't you just ask me? Let's be civilians about it."

"The word is *civilized.* With you? Come off it, Fingers."

"My name's Michael."

"Listen, Michael, I want some answers and I want them now."

"Answers to what?"

"During last night's air raid I saw you coming out of a house on Cardigan Road."

"I never."

"Don't lie to me. I know it was you."

"So what? I might've been at my cousin's. He lives on Cardigan Road."

"You were carrying something."

"He gave me a couple of kippers."

"You're lying to me, Fingers, but we'll let that pass for the moment. I'm interested in the raid before that one."

"When was that, then?"

"Last Wednesday."

"How d'you expect me to remember what I was doing that long ago?"

"Because murder can be quite a memorable experience, Fingers."

He turned pale and slithered in my grip. My palms were sweaty. "Murder? Me? You've got to be joking! I've never killed nobody."

I didn't bother pointing out that that meant he must have killed *somebody*—linguistic niceties such as that being as pointless with someone of Finnegan's intelligence as speaking loudly to a foreigner and hoping to be understood—so I pressed on. "Did you break into Rose Faversham's house on Aston Place last Wednesday during the raid?"

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"Rose Faversham. Who the bloody hell's she when she's at home? Never heard of her."

"You might have known her as Mad Maggie."

"Mad Maggie. Now why would a bloke like me want to break into *her* house? That's assuming he did things like that in the first place, hypnotically, like."

Hypnotically? Did he mean *hypothetically?* I didn't even ask. "To rob her, perhaps?"

"Nah. You reckon a woman who went around looking like she did would have anything worth stealing? Hypnotically, again, of course."

"Of course, Fingers. This entire conversation is *hypnotic.* I understand that."

"Mad Maggie hardly draws attention to herself as a person worth robbing. Not unless you're into antiques."

"And you're not?"

"Wouldn't know a Chippendale from a Gainsborough."

"Know anybody who is?"

"Nah."

"What about the thousands of pounds they say she had hidden in her mattress?"

"And pigs can fly, Constable Bascombe."

"What about silverware?"

"There's a bob or two in a nice canteen of cutlery. Hypnotically, of course."

The one thing that might have been of value to someone other than herself was Rose's silverware, and that had been left alone. Even if Fingers had been surprised by her and killed her, he would hardly have left his sole prize behind when he ran off. On the other hand, with a murder charge hanging over it, the silverware might have turned out to be more of a liability than an asset. I looked at his face, into his eyes, trying to decide whether he was telling the truth. You couldn't tell anything from Finnegan's face, though; it was like a ferret mask.

"Look," he said, licking his lips, "I might be able to help you."

"Help me?"

"Yeah. But . . . you know . . . Not standing here, like this. . . ."

I realized I was still holding him by the lapels, and I had hoisted him so high he had to stand on his tiptoes. I relaxed my grip. "What do you have in mind?"

"We could go to the Prince Albert, have a nice quiet drink. They'll still be open."

I thought for a moment. The hard way hadn't got me very far. Maybe a little diplomacy was in order. Though it galled me to be going for a drink with a thieving illiterate like Fingers Finnegan, there were larger things at stake. I swallowed my pride and said, "Why not."

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Nobody paid us a second glance, which was all right by me. I bought us both a pint, and we took a quiet table by the empty fireplace. Fingers brought a packet of Woodbines out of his pocket and lit up. His smoke burned my lungs and caused me a minor coughing fit, but he didn't seem concerned by it.

"What makes you think you can help me?" I asked him when I'd recovered.

"I'll bet you're after Mad Maggie's murderer, aren't you?"

"How do you know that?"

"Word gets around. The *real* police think it was Gypsies, you know. They've got one of them in the cells right now. Found some silver candlesticks in his possession."

"How did they know whether Rose had any silver candlesticks?"

He curled his lip and looked at me as if I were stupid. "They don't, but they don't know that she didn't, do they? All they need's a confession, and he's a brute in the interrogation room, is that short-arse bastard."

"Who?"

"Longbottom. It's what we call him. Longbottom. Short-arse. Get it?"

"I'm falling off my chair with laughter. Have you got anything interesting to tell me or haven't you?"

"I might have seen someone, mightn't I?"

"Seen someone? Who? Where?"

He rattled his empty glass on the table. "That'd be telling, wouldn't it?"

I sighed, pushed back the disgust I felt rising like vomit in my craw, and bought him another pint. He was smirking all over his ferret face when I got back.

"Ta very much, Constable Bascombe. You're a true gentleman, you are."

The bugger was *enjoying* this. "Fingers," I said, "you don't know how much your praise means to me. Now, to get back to what you were saying."

"It's Michael. I told you. And none of your Micks or Mikes. My name's Michael."

"Right, Michael. You know, I'm a patient man, but I'm beginning to feel just a wee bit let down here. I'm thinking that perhaps it might not be a bad idea for me to take you to Detective Sergeant Longbottom and see if he can't persuade you to tell him what you know."

Fingers jerked upright. "Hang on a minute. There's no need for anything drastic like that. I'm just having my little bit of fun, that's all. You wouldn't deny a fellow his little bit of fun, would you?"

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"Heaven forbid," I muttered. "So now you've had your fun, Fin— er . . . Michael, perhaps we can get back to business."

"Right . . . well . . . theatrically speaking, of course, I might have been in Aston Place on the night you're talking about."

Theatrically? Let it go, Frank. "Last Wednesday, during the air raid."

"Right. Well, I might have been, just, you know, being a concerned citizen and all, going round checking up that all the women and kids was in the shelters, like."

"And the old people. Don't forget the old people."

"Especially the old people. Anyway, like I said, I just *might* have been passing down Aston Place during the air raid, seeing that everyone was all right, like, and I *might* just have seen someone coming out of Mad Maggie's house."

"Did you?"

"Well, it was dark, and that bloody smoke from the power station doesn't make things any better. Like a real pea-souper, that is. Anyway, I might just have seen this figure, like, a quick glimpse."

"I understand. Any idea who it was?"

"Not at first I hadn't, but now I've an idea. I just hadn't seen him for a long time."

"Where were you?"

"Coming out of— Can't have been more than two or three houses away. When I saw him he gave me a real fright, so I pressed myself back in the doorway, like, so he couldn't see me."

"But you got a look at him?"

"Not a good one. First thing I noticed, though, is he was wearing a uniform."

"What kind of uniform?"

"I don't know, do I? Soldier's, I suppose."

"Anything else?"

"Well, he moved off sort of sideways, like."

"Crabwise?"

"Come again?"

"Like a crab?"

"If you say so, Constable Bascombe."

Something about all this was beginning to make sense, but I wasn't sure I liked the sense it made. "Did you notice anything else?"

"I saw him go into a house across the street."

"Which one?" I asked, half of me not wanting to know the answer.

"The milkman's," he said.

I didn't want to, but I had to see this through. *Tommy Markham.* My own godson. All afternoon I thought about it, and I could see

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no way out of confronting Harry and Tommy. No matter how much thinking I did, I couldn't come up with an explanation, and if Tommy *had* murdered Rose Faversham, I wanted to know why. He had certainly been acting oddly since he came back from the army hospital, but I had acted rather strangely myself after they released me from the hospital in Manchester in 1918. I knew better than to judge a man by the way he reacts to war.

I consoled myself with the fact that Tommy might not have killed Rose, that she was already dead when he went to see her, but I knew in my heart that didn't make sense. Nobody just dropped in on Mad Maggie to see how she was doing, and the idea of two people going to see her in one night was absurd. No, I knew that the person Fingers had seen coming out of Rose's house had to be her killer, and he swore that person was Tommy Markham.

Fingers could have been lying, but that didn't make sense, either. For a start, he wasn't that clever. He must also know that I would confront Tommy and that, one way or another, I'd find out the truth. No, if Fingers had killed Mad Maggie and wanted to escape blame, all he had to do was deny that he had been anywhere near her house and let the Gypsy take the fall.

I steeled myself with a quick brandy, then I went around to Harry's house just after eight o'clock. They were all listening to a variety programme on the Home Service, and someone was torturing "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square." As usual, Tommy was wearing his army uniform, even though he was on extended leave. He still looked ill, pale, and thin. His mother, Polly, a stout, silent woman I had known ever since she was a little girl, offered to make tea and disappeared into the kitchen.

"What brings you out at this time of night, then?" Harry asked. "Want some company down at the Prince Albert?"

I shook my head. "Actually, it's your Tommy I came to see."

A shadow of fear crossed Harry's face. "Tommy? Well, you'd better ask him yourself, then. Best of luck."

Tommy hadn't moved yet, but when I addressed him, he slowly turned to face me. There was a look of great disappointment in his eyes, as if he knew he had had something valuable in his grasp, only to have it taken from him at the last minute. Harry turned off the radio.

"Tommy," I said, speaking as gently as I could, "did you go to visit Mad Maggie last Wednesday night, the night of the air raid?"

Harry was staring at me, disbelief written all over his face. "For God's sake, Frank!" he began, but I waved him down.

"Did you, Tommy? Did you visit Mad Maggie?"

Slowly, Tommy nodded.

"You don't have to say any more," Harry said, getting to his feet.

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He turned to me as if I were his betrayer. "I've considered you a good friend for many years, Frank, but you're pushing me too far."

Polly came back in with the teapot and took in the scene at a glance. "What's up? What's going on?"

"Sit down, Polly," I said. "I'm asking your Tommy a few questions, that's all."

Polly sat. Harry remained standing, fists clenched at his sides, then Tommy's voice broke the deadlock. "It's all right, Mum," he said to Polly, "I want to tell him. I want to get it off my chest."

"I don't know what you're talking about, son," she said.

Tommy pointed at Harry. "He does. He's not as daft as he looks."

I looked at Harry, who sat down again and shook his head.

Tommy turned back to me. "Did I go visit Mad Maggie? Yes, I did. Did I kill her? Yes, I did. I got in through the back window. It wasn't locked. I picked up the posser and went through into the living room. She was sitting in the dark. Didn't even have a wireless. She must have heard me, but she didn't move. She looked at me just once before I hit her, and I could swear she knew why I was doing it. She understood and she knew it was right. It was *just.*"

As Tommy spoke, he became more animated and his eyes started to glow with life again, as if his prize were once more within his grasp.

"Why did you do it, Tommy?" I asked. "What did she ever do to harm you?"

He looked at Harry. "She killed my dad."

"She what?"

"I told you. She killed my dad. My real dad."

Polly flopped back in her armchair, tea forgotten, and put her hand to her heart. "Tommy, what are you saying?"

"He knew," he said, looking at Harry again. "Or at least he suspected. I told him about the field, about the villagers, the madwoman."

Harry shook his head. "I *didn't* know," he said. "You never told me it was *her*. All I knew was that you were upset, you were saying crazy things and acting strange. Especially when you came in from the raid that night. I was worried, that's all. If I ever suspected you, that's the only reason, son, I swear it. When I found her body, I thought if there was the remotest possibility . . . That's why I went for Frank. I told him to lay off it, to let the Gypos take the blame. But he wouldn't." Harry pointed his finger at me, red in the face. "If you want to blame anyone, blame him."

"Calm down, Harry," I told him. "You'll give yourself a heart attack."

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"It's not a matter of blame," Tommy said. "It's about justice. And justice has been served."

"Better tell me about it, Tommy," I said. The air-raid siren went off, wailing up and down the scale. We all ignored it.

Tommy paused and ran his hand through his closely cropped hair. He looked at me. "You should understand, Mr. Bascombe. You were there. He was your best friend."

I frowned. "Tell me, Tommy."

"Before Dunkirk, a group of us got cut off and we were in this village near Ypres for a few days, before the Germans got too close. We almost didn't make it to the coast in time for the evacuation. The people were frightened about what the Germans might do if they found out we were there, but they were kind to us. I became quite friendly with one old fellow who spoke very good English, and I told him my father had been killed somewhere near there in the first war. Passchendaele. I said I'd never seen his grave. One day, the old man took me out in his horse and cart and showed me some fields. It was late May, and the early poppies were just coming out among the rows of crosses. It looked beautiful. I knew my father was there somewhere." Tommy choked for a moment, looked away, and wiped his eyes.

"Then the old man told me a story," he went on. "He said there was a woman living in the village who used to . . . you know . . . with the British soldiers. But she was in love with a German officer, and she passed on any information she could pick up from the British directly to him. One soldier let something slip about some new trench positions they were preparing for a surprise attack, and before anyone knew what had hit them, the trenches were shelled and the Germans swarmed into them. They killed every British soldier in their path. It came to hand-to-hand combat in the end. Bayonets. And the woman's German lover was one of the last to die."

Tommy paused, glanced at his mother, and went on, "He told me she never recovered. She went mad, and for a while after the armies had moved on she could be heard wailing for her dead German lover in the poppy fields at night. Then nothing more was heard of her. The rumour was that she had gone to England, where they had plenty of other madwomen to keep her company. I thought of Mad Maggie right from the start, of course, and I remembered the way she used to burst into French every now and then. I asked him if he had a photograph, and he said he thought he had an old one. We went back to his house, and he rummaged through his attic and came down with an old album. There she was. The same sort of clothes. That same look about her. Much younger and very beautiful, but it was *her*. It was Mad Maggie. And she had killed my father. He was in one of those trenches."

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"What happened next, Tommy?"

"I don't remember much of the next couple of months. The Germans got too close and we had to make a hasty departure. That's when I was wounded. I was lucky to make it to Dunkirk. If it hadn't been for my mates . . . they carried me most of the way. Anyway, for a while I didn't know where I was. In and out of consciousness. To be honest, half the time I preferred to be out of it. I had dreams, nightmares, visions, and I saw myself coming back and avenging my father's death."

His eyes shone with pride and righteousness as he spoke. Outside, the bombs were starting to sound alarmingly close. "Let's get down to the shelter," Harry suggested.

"No," said Tommy, holding up his hand. "Hear me out now. Wait till I'm done." He turned to me. "You should understand, Mr. Bascombe. She killed my dad. He was your best friend. You should understand. I only did what was right."

I shook my head. "There's no avenging deaths during wartime, Tommy. It's every man for himself. Some German bullet or bayonet had Larry's name on it, and that was that. Wrong place, wrong time. It could just as easily have been me."

Tommy stared at me in disbelief.

"Besides," I went on, getting a little concerned at the explosions outside, "are you sure it was her, Tommy? It seems an awful coincidence that she should end up living on our street, don't you think?"

"I'm sure. I saw the photograph. I've still got it."

"Can I have a look?"

Tommy opened his top pocket and handed me a creased photograph. There was no doubt about the superficial resemblance between the woman depicted there, leaning against a farmer's fence, wearing high-buttoned boots, smiling and holding her hand to her forehead to keep the sun out of her eyes, and the woman whose photograph I had found in Rose Faversham's shoebox. But it wasn't Rose Faversham. In fact, it wasn't any of the three—Midge, Rose, or Margaret. There were no dimples, for a start, and the eyes were different. We all have our ways of identifying people, and with me it's always the eyes. Show me someone at six, sixteen, and sixty and I'll know if it's the same person or not by the eyes.

Another bomb landed far too close for comfort, and the whole house shook. Then a split second later came a tremendous explosion. Plaster fell off the ceiling. The lights and radio went off. I could hear the drone of the bombers slowly disappearing to the southeast, on their way home again. We were all shaken, but I pulled myself to my feet first and suggested we go outside to see if anyone needed help.

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I didn't really think he'd make a run for it, but I stuck close to Tommy as we all went outside. The smell was awful; the bitter, fiery smell of the explosive and a whiff of gas from a fractured pipe mixed with dust from broken masonry. The sky was lit up like Guy Fawkes night. It was a terrible sight that met our eyes, and the four of us could only stand and stare.

A bomb had taken out about three houses on the other side of the street. The middle one, now nothing but a pile of burning rubble, was Mad Maggie's.

When the answers to my letters started trickling in a couple of weeks after Tommy's arrest, I picked up some more leads, one of which eventually led me to Midge Livesey, now a mother of two boys—both in the RAF—who was living only thirty miles away, in the country. I telephoned her, and she seemed pleased to hear from someone who had known Rose, though she was saddened by the news of Rose's death, and she suggested I be her guest for the weekend.

Though it was late October, the weather was fine when I got off the train at the tiny station. It was a wonderful feeling to be out in the country again. I had been away for so long I had almost forgotten what the autumn leaves looked like and how many different varieties of birdsong there are. The sweet, acrid scent of burning leaves from someone's garden made a fine change from the stink of the air raids.

Midge and her husband, Arthur, welcomed me at the door of their cottage and told me they had already prepared the spare room. After I had laid out my things on the bed, I opened the window. Directly outside stood an apple tree, and beyond that I could see the landscape undulating to the north, where the large anvil shapes of peaks and fells were visible in the distance. I took in a deep breath of fresh air—as deep as I could manage with my poor lungs—and for once it didn't make me cough. Perhaps it was time I left the city, I thought. But no, there were police duties to attend to, and I loved my teaching job. After the war, perhaps, I would think about it again, see if I could get a job in a village school.

When I showed Midge the photograph of the three of them over dinner that evening, a sad smile played across her features, and she touched the surface with her fingers, as if it could send out some sort of message to her.

"Yes," she said, "that was Rose. And that was Margaret. Poor Margaret, she died in childbirth ten years ago. The war wasn't all bad for us. We did have some good times. But I think the day that photograph was taken marked the beginning of the end. It was the day before the third Ypres battle started, and we were field nurses. We used to go onto the fields and into the trenches to

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clean up after the battles." She shook her head and looked at Arthur, who tenderly put his hand on top of hers. "You've never . . . well, I suppose you have." She looked at her husband. "Arthur understands, too. He was wounded at Arras. I worry about my boys. Just remembering, just thinking about it, makes me fear for them terribly. Does that make sense?"

"Yes," I said.

She paused for a moment and poured us all tea. "Anyway, Rose was especially sensitive," she went on. "She wrote poetry and wanted to go to university to study English literature when it was all over. French, too. She spoke French very well and spent a lot of time talking to the poor wounded French soldiers. Often they were with the English, you know, and there was nobody could talk to them. Rose did. She fell in love with a handsome young English lieutenant. Nicholas, his name was." She smiled. "But we were young. We were always falling in love back then."

"What happened to her?" I asked.

"Rose? She broke under the strain. Shell shock, I suppose you'd call it. You hear a lot about the poor boys, the breakdowns, the self-inflicted wounds, but you never hear much about the women, do you? Where are we in the history books? We might not have been shooting at the Germans and only in minimal danger of getting shot at ourselves—though there were times—but we were *there*. We saw the slaughter firsthand. We were up to our elbows in blood and guts. Some people just couldn't take it, the way some of the boys couldn't take combat. I'll say this, though, I think it was Nicholas's death that finally sent Rose over the edge. It was the following year, nineteen eighteen, the end of March, near a little village on the Somme called St. Quentin. She found him, you know, on the field. It was pure chance. Half his head had been blown away. She was never the same. She used to mutter to herself in French and go into long silences. Eventually, she tried to commit suicide by taking an overdose of morphine, but a doctor found her in time. She was invalided out in the end."

"Do you know what happened next?"

"I visited her as soon as the war was over. She'd just come out of the hospital and was living with her parents. They were wealthy land owners—very posh, you might say—and they hadn't a clue what to do with her. She was an embarrassment to them. In the end, they set up a small fund for her, so she would never have to go without, and left her to her own devices."

After a moment or two's silence, I showed Midge the book of poetry. Again, she fingered it like a blind person looking for meaning. "Oh yes. Ivor Gurney. She was always reading this." She turned the pages. "This was her favourite." She read us a short poem called "Bach and the Sentry," in which the poet on sentry

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duty hears his favourite Bach prelude in his imagination and wonders how he will feel later, when he actually plays the piece again in peacetime. She shook her head. "Poor mad Rose. Nobody knew what to do with her. Do tell me what became of her."

I told her what I knew, which wasn't much, though for some reason I held back the part about Tommy and his mistake. I didn't want Midge to know that my godson had mistaken her friend for a traitor. It seemed enough to lay the blame at the feet of a Gypsy thief and hope that Midge wasn't one of those women who followed criminal trials closely in the newspapers.

Nor did I tell her that Rose's house had been destroyed by a bomb almost a week after the murder and that she would almost certainly have been killed anyway. Midge didn't need that kind of cruel irony. She had suffered enough; she had enough bad memories to fuel her nightmares, and enough to worry about in the shape of her two boys.

I simply told her that Rose was a very private person, certainly eccentric in her dress and her mannerisms, and that none of us really knew her very well. She was a part of the community, though, and we all mourned her loss.

So Mad Maggie was another of war's victims, I thought, as I breathed in the scent of the apple tree before getting into bed that night. One of the uncelebrated ones. She came to our community to live out her days in anonymous grief and whatever inner peace she could scrounge for herself, her sole valuable possessions a book of poetry, an old photograph, and a nursing medal.

And so she would have remained, a figure to be mocked by the children and ignored by the adults, had it not been for another damn war, another damaged soul, and the same bloody poppy field in Flanders.

Requiem in pace, Rose, though I am not a religious man. *Requiem in pace.*

It should never have happened, but they hanged Tommy Markham for the murder of Rose Faversham at Wandsworth Prison on 25th May, 1941, at eight o'clock in the morning.

Everyone said Tommy should have got off for psychiatric reasons, but his barrister had a permanent hangover, and the judge had an irritable bowel. In addition, the *expert* psychiatrist hired to evaluate him didn't know shell shock from an Oedipus complex.

The only thing we could console ourselves with was that Tommy went to the gallows proud and at peace with himself for having avenged his father's death.

I hadn't the heart to tell him that he was wrong about Mad Maggie, that she wasn't the woman he thought she was. ●

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DEAD CATS

by Kate Gallison

"I don't feel safe," Willa Palmieri said.

For a horrible moment her husband thought she was somehow able to see inside his head.

He shut off the ignition. In another minute he would be staggering after her into the hotel lobby, laden with suitcases full of wispy author dresses and stupid hats. People would call him "Mr. Palmieri," though his own name was Jones. Like a whisper in his ear, like a flower blooming suddenly in his brain, the thought had just come to him that he didn't have to do this. He could wring her skinny neck, blame it on a passing stranger, and retire to the Bahamas to collect the royalties from her forty-seven wildly successful mystery novels. Not safe? "What do you mean?" he said.

How do reviewers describe Kate Gallison? *Kirkus*: "deadpan, inventive, and funny"; the *New York Times*: "offbeat"; *Publishers Weekly*: a writer "whose spurts and zigzags betoken an original mind." We find her to be all these things in her latest spoof for *EQMM*. When not turning out comic short tales for magazines Ms. Gallison writes novels for both Little Brown and St. Martin's.

"Publishing my work. I feel so exposed." Of course, this wasn't about him; she never paid any attention to him; it was about her and her writing career.

"Why don't you simply regard it as a cash cow, the way I do? Published work is supposed to be exposed."

"Really, Alfred, sometimes I think . . ." She massaged her head.

Not another migraine. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean cash cow, I meant, regard your work as a means of income." *The cash cow is you, my dear.* "You're a huge success. Everyone admires your work. Your fans are waiting for you. What are you afraid of?"

"Emmelina Villenhoff's fan club is coming to this conference," she said irrelevantly.

"Are you afraid of being eclipsed by the radiance of Emmelina Villenhoff?"

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"Good heavens, no. She does her thing, the thing with the cats, and I do mine."

"The thing with the cats?"

"Yes, she writes stories where the cat solves the mystery. Emmelina is a perfectly nice woman. But her fans . . . and even some of my fans . . . I don't know, but I have to ask myself, am I really writing for these people?"

"What's wrong with them?"

"They don't want a reflection of the world as you and I know it, Alfred. They want the world as they want it to be."

"So? Give it to them." Now comes the lecture on artistic integrity, hubda, hubda, he thought, wishing he had kept his mouth shut. But no, it was the rant about the cats.

"How many murder mysteries do you know of that feature the death of young women?" she said. For the five hundredth time.

"Most of them," he replied dutifully, as he opened the trunk and gathered the luggage. This particular woman, no longer young, would make a most entertaining picture sailing over the edge of the parking deck and onto the pavement five stories below. He would be happy to read that book.

"And how many involve the death of cats?" she continued.

"Almost none."

"This is not a reflection of life, Alfred. This is not even an accurate view of how things ought to be. I'm as fond of cats as the next person; you know how much I love Toodles and Fluffy. But a daughter would be worth far more to me."

"Mmh." He ducked into the trunk of the car, looking for the hatbox. So she was going to throw it up to him again that he couldn't give her children.

But no, she was off on an entirely different tack. "Dot Funger nearly died in that bombing attack on her car in Denver. She was in the hospital for months. No one ever claimed credit for it, but we all knew it was the Emmelina Villenhoff fan club."

"Dot Funger killed a cat in her book?"

"Well, no, she killed an actual cat. She was out digging weeds in the garden, and the neighbor's tomcat came along and sprayed her in the face. She had one of those claw things in her hand. It was instinctive."

"How do they know the bomb wasn't planted by the owner of the cat?"

"The cat's owner had no motive. The case was still in litigation. He had every reason to think it would come out in his favor."

"What does this have to do with you? Did you kill a cat in your latest book? Or in your garden?"

"No, no, it's just that . . . I don't feel safe with some of these people. Most of the fans are lovely, they're sweet and kind to the

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writers, they understand what we're trying to do in our work, they value us, but some of the others . . . I think some of the others aren't quite right."

"They bombed this woman's car," he mused.

"I'm certain of it."

"We'll be careful of them," he said. "We will avoid giving offense." He secured the hatbox under his arm, hefted the suitcases with a soft grunt of arthritic pain, and trailed after her toward the elevator. Bombed the car, did they? His plan was taking shape.

No one knew how the dead-cat rumors began circulating throughout the mystery conference. It might have been the notes tacked to the bulletin board, three or four of them, begging whoever found Buzzy or Fofo to return them to their owners for various extravagant rewards. Snapshots accompanied some of these plaintive messages, Polaroid pictures of alley cats and pampered tabbies. All night Friday in the upper halls of the conference hotel cat death-howls echoed (Alfred was an excellent mimic), and in the morning there appeared mysterious tufts of hair (no one noticed that it was acrylic). By noon Saturday the entire convention was buzzing with the news that someone in their midst was sneaking around in the night murdering cats.

Early that afternoon Alfred stopped by the fan lounge for a cup of java, killing time while his wife kept an appointment with her editor. There he saw five women huddled around a table in the corner. Respectable and unassuming in appearance, they could have been retired schoolteachers or librarians, except that they seemed so tense. One of them kept glancing at the door; another rolled the pieces of her shredded paper napkin into little pills; a third was breathing hard, as though she had just run upstairs. All wore a distinctive badge, a large button with the black silhouette of a cat against a purple background, surmounted by the monogram EVS in flowery pink script. These would be members of the Emmelina Villenhoff Society. He took his coffee and sat next to them, feigning nonchalance.

"A serial cat killer!" one of them hissed, and bit her knuckle.

"We will have justice," another said. "We must."

"But why would anyone—?"

"How could anyone!"

"All I want to know is who."

"Should be easy enough to find out," Alfred said to them.

They all turned and stared.

"A strangled cat leaves marks, right?" he said. "I never heard of a cat giving up without a fight. Look for someone with scratched arms."

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"Scratched arms. Of course," said the one who thirsted for justice.

Alfred drained his coffee and ankled out before they could ask what made him think the cats were strangled.

The next phase of Alfred's plan proved somewhat more difficult to implement.

There was an actual alley, not half a block from the conference hotel, wherein could be found containers of restaurant garbage that would doubtless attract stray alley cats. Long after the awards banquet, long after Willa had taken off her hat and wig, hung up her evening dress (long-sleeved, fortunately for Alfred's purposes), and put on her nightgown and frilly sleep mask, it was to this place that he stole away. The vision of his wife's blameless arms, all exposed above the coverlet, only whetted his appetite to see them clawed by cats. He took with him a thick jacket, suitable for wrapping up unwilling felines and carrying them back to the room with a minimum of fuss.

The alley was dark, more sinister than it had seemed by day. Something large and furry moved in the shadows behind the last can, surely a big gray cat. Moving quickly, Alfred enveloped the thing in his coat.

It put up one hell of a fight.

By the time he realized that what he had was a huge specimen of *Rattus Norvegicus*, Alfred had been bitten and clawed six ways from Sunday. This was not how it was supposed to go. Even if he could get the thing inside and make it scratch Willa, its dead body lying outside the hotel room would not have the same effect on the women of the Emmelina Villenhoff Society as the dead body of a cat. With a curse he released the rat and watched it scuttle away.

But there's more than one way to skin a cat.

Next morning Alfred was able to secure the necessary item and return to the room just before his wife had quite finished dressing. The suit jacket still lay across the foot of the bed, and her blouse had very short sleeves.

"For me?" Willa blushed, a deep pink almost the color of the bunch of long-stemmed roses he held out to her.

"You made such a success of your panel discussion," he said. "Everyone loved you. Here. Take these."

She pulled back just before he was able to fasten the thorns in her arm. "Put them in water, will you, darling?" she said.

"I want to see you hold them."

"Darling, I can't hold them. They're too thorny."

"Please. Please take them."

But she would not take them; instead, she drew away and

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looked at him, long and searchingly, in a way that he could never remember her having done before. Her lips twisted in a little smile. Once again he had the sensation that she was looking inside his head.

She turned away and slipped into the jacket. "Alfred, I know what these roses are all about," she said. "It's no use. You might as well keep them."

"What? What do you mean?"

"Look at your hands, dear heart."

He looked; the rat bites and scratches stood out in lines of red. "I had an encounter with an animal," he said.

"Was she very pretty?"

A woman? Some hot-blooded wench with long claws? And him? Alfred almost burst out laughing, the notion was so absurd. At their age. One might just as well accuse Willa of carrying on an affair with her editor during their frequent business meetings. But he refrained from laughing, because he understood his wife well enough to know that she hated to be ridiculed and would surely punish him for it. Instead he assumed an expression of injured innocence and said, "You're being silly, my dear. I brought you these roses simply because you're so lovely. Here. Take them."

"I know you brought them to salve your conscience," she said. "In a way this makes it easier to say what I have to say. Alfred, for a long time now we've both been aware that things aren't working out between us."

"What do you mean?"

"I know how hard you've tried, Alfred, and believe me, so have I, but it's time to call it a day. I'm not going home with you."

"You're not?"

"I'm in love with Wesley."

"Your editor?"

"I'm leaving the conference with him. We're kindred spirits, Alfred. He understands me and my work in ways that you never could. We're going to try to make a life together."

"But what will I—"

"You can have the house and everything in it," she said, with a sad smile. "I'll make sure you have money. My lawyers will be in touch. You'll find someone else." Tenderly, she took his scratched hands in her hands; the roses lay on the floor between them. "Perhaps you've found your someone else already," she said. "These scratches seem to be getting infected, by the way. Don't forget to take care of them." She kissed his fingertips, and then his forehead. "Goodbye," she said, and swept out the door, leaving all her luggage behind except for the hatbox.

Twenty-five years. Just like that.

❖ ❖ ❖

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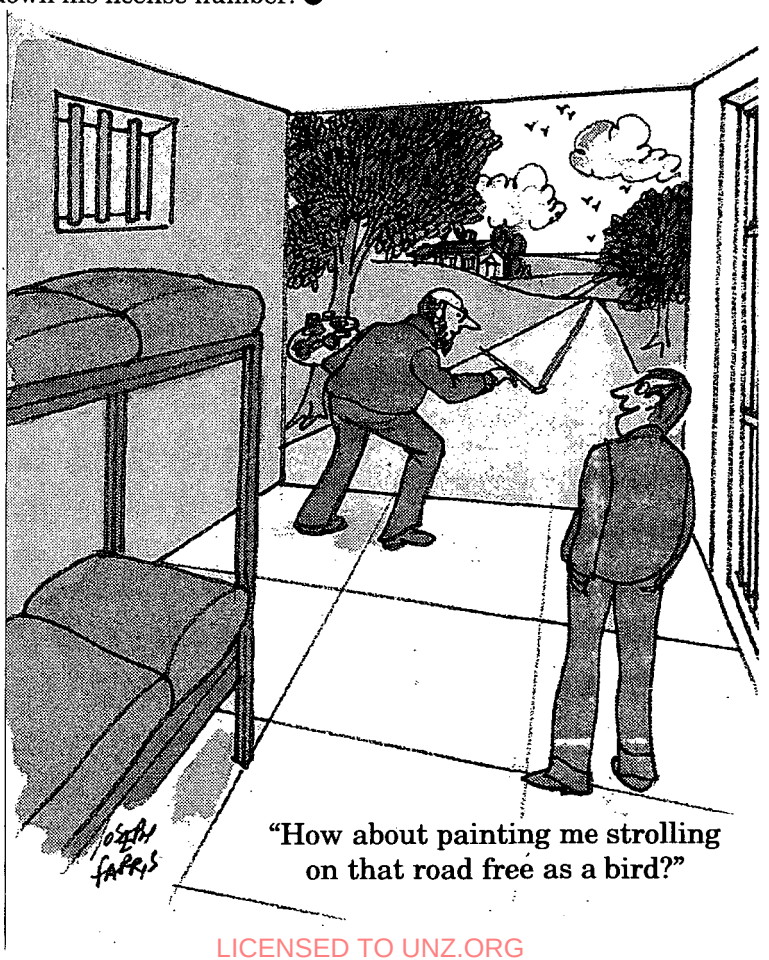
In the garage elevator, tufts of acrylic fur floated from his jacket pockets as Alfred searched for the car keys. For a moment he thought Willa had taken the car and left him with no way to get home. She and that wretched editor were even now enjoying the comforts of Alfred's Mercedes-Benz, speeding toward their new life together in New York City. Alfred himself would be forced to take the bus with who knows what sort of disagreeable riffraff.

But finally, in the deepest part of his right-hand pants pocket, he found them. His wife had done the decent thing after all. By the time he stepped off the elevator he was ready to begin his life again, a free man, chin high, car keys in hand, prepared to put the horrors of this miserable weekend behind him. He flung his bag into the backseat and jumped behind the wheel. Free. He did not notice the trail of furry hairs that followed him all the way from the elevator to his car.

Neither did he notice the gray-haired woman with the purple badge who stood in the shadows observing the trail of fur, writing down his license number. ●



"How about painting me strolling on that road free as a bird?"

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Art by Allen Davis

The Man in the White Hat

by Loren D. Estleman

A painting the size of a barn door greeted Valentino inside the entrance to the Red Montana and Dixie Day Museum on Ventura. In it, an implausibly young Montana sat astride a rearing white stallion—Tinderbox, of course—smiling broadly and waving his milk-colored Stetson. Across from it hung a more subdued study of Dixie Day, the cowboy hero's wife, younger still and pretty in tailored white buckskins, leading her mare Cocoa. The guard stationed between the paintings found the visitor's name on the guest list and directed him to the reception.

He found the guests shuffling around a floor with a tile mosaic of Montana and Day backed by Old Glory. Scooping a glass of champagne from a passing tray, he wandered along the walls,

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admiring the framed stills from the couple's many horse operas until someone signaled for attention.

Red Montana in person was not as tall as he appeared on film, and he had put on weight since retirement; his chins spilled over the knot of his silk necktie. His suit, with flared lapels and arrow pockets, was beautifully cut, although it probably hadn't cost much more than his head of silver hair, a tribute to the wigmaker's craft. His voice was reedy with age, but retained an echo of the hearty bray of a circus ringmaster.

"Howdy, friends and neighbors. I ain't tall on speechifyin', so I'll make this short and sweet. As of this moment, the Dixie Day Foundation has raised more than two million dollars for cancer research. Dixie ain't feeling up to joining us, but she asked me special to thank all you folks for opening up your hearts and pocketbooks."

Hands clapped, flashguns went off. The cowboy star issued a mock-stern order not to be bashful about "bellyin' up to the cook wagon," and then the assembly broke into small groups. Valentino joined a line waiting to shake Montana's hand. He found the old man's grip surprisingly firm.

"You're that detective feller."

Valentino clarified. "*Film* detective. Actually, I'm just an historian."

"Meet me in the curator's office in five minutes."

There were exhibition rooms off the corridor, but Valentino didn't look inside any of them. He'd heard Montana had had the original Tinderbox stuffed and mounted and was reluctant to find out that the story wasn't just an urban myth.

It was obvious the curator's office actually belonged to Montana. The walls were covered with autographed pictures of him shaking hands with various presidents, Ernest Hemingway, and Albert Einstein. Montana's famous silver-studded saddle perched on a stand behind a desk supporting a computer console and a fax machine. The old man was seated at the desk, signing his name to one of a stack of eight-by-ten glossies at his elbow. He placed it on the stack and thanked Valentino for coming.

Loren D. Estleman worked as a newspaper reporter and editor before making the break to full-time fiction writing in 1980. Since then he has made a reputation for himself as one of America's leading P.I. writers, and also as a distinguished author of mainstream fiction. The "film detective" series he writes for *EQMM* is a labor of love: he knows the world of old movies as well as any real film detective.

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"Thank you for the invitation." He'd wondered why he'd been on the list, since neither he nor the UCLA Film Preservation Department had contributed to the Dixie Day Foundation.

"They tell me you can sniff out a foot of silver-nitrate stock in a pile of horse manure."

"I hope I'll never have to," Valentino said. "But I've found portions of lost classic films in some unlikely places."

"I need someone with detective skills. I'd go to a pro, but I've been in the movie business sixty years. I only trust film people. I hear you can keep a secret."

"It's important if I'm going to stay ahead of Viacom and Ted Turner." He wondered where this was headed.

"I'm counting on that." Montana produced a key ring with a silver horse's head attached, unlocked a drawer, and drew out an eight-by-ten Manila envelope. "You're aware my wife is dying."

Valentino expressed sympathy. All Hollywood knew Dixie Day had inoperable cancer and that the couple had chosen to spend her last months raising money for cancer research. Her popularity as the Sweetheart of the Range was an asset to the cause.

"These were faxed to me here last week." Montana opened the envelope and handed him a sheaf of paper.

It was plain fax stock. The images that had been scanned onto the sheets were smudged and grainy, but Valentino recognized Dixie Day's face from her old movies. She appeared no older than twenty, naked in the arms of an unclothed anonymous male.

"Are you sure they're genuine?"

"I checked that out years ago, the first time I saw them. They're enlargements of frames from a stag film Dixie made before she broke in at RKO. I paid a hundred thousand cash for the negative, and what I was assured was every existing print, and burned them. I thought that was the end of it."

"You can never be sure how many prints were made. Do you think it's the same blackmailer?" He gave back the pictures.

"I have no idea. I put the cash in a paper sack in a locker at LAX, as I was instructed in the letter that came with the sample print. The next day the negative and prints came by special delivery. I never made direct contact with anyone. This time I haven't even received a demand. Just these." He jammed the sheaf back into the envelope, returned it to the drawer, and closed and locked it. "I want you to find out who sent them."

"I wouldn't know where to start."

"Talk to Sam O'Reilly. He's living at the Actors' Home."

"Your old sidekick? I thought he died."

"He pretty much did, as far as the studios were concerned: drank himself right out of paying work. He's always blamed me for not going to bat for him. Drunks are never responsible for the

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jackrabbit holes they step in. It'd be just like him to try and get back at me by ruining Dixie's reputation."

"Why me? You've offered to match every dollar the Foundation brings in. That means you can afford to hire a private agency and pay for its discretion."

"I told you, I only trust film people. And I've got incentive. Switch off that light, will you, son?"

Valentino flipped the switch next to the door, plunging the room into darkness. At the same moment, Montana pressed something under the desk. A white screen hummed down from the ceiling and a wall panel opened behind the desk, exposing a projector. Montana pressed something else and the projector came on with a whir.

For the next five minutes, the film detective was entranced by ancient black-and-white images of galloping horses and smoking six-guns, accompanied by a tinny soundtrack full of thundering music and hard-bitten frontier dialogue. When his host turned off the projector, it took him a moment to find the light switch.

"Six-gun Sonata," Valentino said, recovering. "The first feature to pair Red Montana and Dixie Day. I heard it was lost."

"I bought it from Republic cheap in nineteen forty and put it in a vault. Later I struck off a new master on safety stock and destroyed the original nitrate print. A collector offered me a quarter-million for it last year. I told him I didn't have it. What do I need with another quarter-million? Now I'm offering it to you, payable on delivery of the blackmailer's name."

"I'm really not that kind of detective."

Montana sat back, resting his hands on his paunch. *"Six-gun Sonata* means nothing to me. If you turn me down, I'll burn it."

"What makes that different from blackmail?"

"I didn't say I was better than this scum. Just richer."

Valentino thought. He was reeling from the double blow of finding, then perhaps losing, a cinematic treasure and learning that this champion of the Code of the West had much in common with the blackguards he'd pursued in feature after feature.

"I'll see O'Reilly," he said. "I can't promise anything."

"There's the difference." Montana took a cigar from the box on the desk and produced a lighter with a diamond horseshoe on it. "I can." The jet of flame signaled the end of the meeting.

"He said *that?"*

Sam "Slap" O'Reilly hadn't changed so much physically that the film detective couldn't recognize him from his comic bits in Red Montana movies. The whiskey welts on his long horsey features were new and his hair was thin, but brushed neatly. His room at the Motion Picture Actors Home was as tidy as the man himself,

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seated in a deep armchair in loose tan slacks, slippers, and a white shirt buttoned to the neck. There was nothing present to mark his career in movies, only family photographs and a letter in crayon from a great-grandchild, tacked to a bulletin board.

"Montana's a liar," he went on. "It's true my drinking cut short my livelihood, but I never asked anyone to bail me out, least of all him. I haven't touched a drop in thirty years."

"What split you up, if not that?" Valentino asked.

"We never did like each other. Audiences liked me, and that was enough to keep me on contract. But I never really hated him until he stole Dixie from me."

"You and Dixie Day?"

He grinned, spurring memories of his old dimwit persona. "I was quite a man with the ladies off the set, guess you didn't know that. But it was a mistake to introduce Dixie to Montana. We were shooting a three-day oater on loan to RKO. He talked to the director and got her a bit, one line. The audience fell for her. Republic signed her and the next thing you know they're both billed above the title. They got married a year later."

"You must resent them both."

"Not Dixie. You can't blame a girl for taking advantage of a break, and anyway I don't think she felt anything for me. I did for her, though. Montana knew that, and he went after her the way he went after money and glory, and God help whoever got in his way."

"That was almost sixty years ago. A long time to be angry."

"I'm not angry. I was for a long time, but I got over it. If I'd married Dixie I'd have messed that up just like I messed it up with the woman I did marry." His face went slack. "Who'd you say you were with, again? My memory isn't so good these days."

"The Film Preservation Department at UCLA. I'm trying to track down a movie Dixie Day made before she met Red Montana." He'd cooked up the half-lie on the way there from the museum.

"I wouldn't know anything about it. I'd only been going out with her a couple of weeks when I brought her to the set. We met at a party. She came there with a cameraman. I'll remember his name in a minute." His mind wandered. "I hear Dixie's in a bad way."

"The doctors don't give her long to live."

"I'm sorry. She was a good old gal, too good for Montana. I hope that crumb doesn't stuff her like he did Tinderbox."

"The cameraman," Valentino prompted.

"Cameraman?" When the muscles in O'Reilly's features let go, he truly looked old. "Uh. Dick Hennessey. I remember his name on account of Hal Roach bounced him later. It was a big scandal at the time. Cops busted him for shooting stag films on the side."

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❖ ❖ ❖

The only promising-looking Richard Hennessey listed in Los Angeles County ran a production company in Pasadena. He answered his own telephone.

"My father was a cameraman," he told Valentino. "He passed away six years ago."

"I'm very sorry. I'm looking for a film he might have shot back in the thirties."

"For Hal Roach?"

"No, it was something on the side."

"Oh, you mean the porno stuff. Can't help you there. The judge had it all burned after Pop was convicted. He did a hundred and thirty-six hours of community service, a record then. Fatty Arbuckle didn't get that."

Valentino didn't bother pointing out Arbuckle was acquitted.

Hennessey's candor had surprised him. "That must be a painful memory."

"Not at all. Pop opened his own photo-supply store and did all right. His films were tame by today's standards. The A studios shoot steamier stuff all the time and get away with an R rating."

"You *saw* some of his stag films?"

"Better than that. I was his assistant. The only ten-year-old apprentice cinematographer in the business."

Hennessey Productions worked out of an ornate old Queen Anne house on San Diego Boulevard. The film detective tiptoed among the cables and equipment cluttering a large room on the ground floor and shook hands with a thickset man in shirtsleeves standing with a director half his age. Nearby a young couple sat up in bed, the woman smoking, the man having his makeup touched up by a technician. They were plainly naked under the sheet.

Hennessey was a ruddy-faced sixty-something, with gold chains around his neck and his hair dyed glossy black. "We're shooting a two-reeler for the Playboy Channel," he said. "I'm not doing anything Pop didn't do, but now it's respectable."

He and his visitor adjourned to a break room equipped with a refrigerator and microwave oven. They sat down at a laminated table.

"Valentino. Any relation?"

"My father says no. Let's talk about yours."

"Gladly. I owe everything to Pop. He helped me get set up in business and loaned me money to stay afloat through the last recession."

"You don't think it was irresponsible to expose you to his stag operation at such an early age?"

"I was a Hollywood brat. If you want to hear about exposing, talk to the producer who exposed himself to Shirley Temple in his

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office at Fox. At least my old man taught me a trade."

"Did that trade include Dixie Day?"

Hennessey showed no surprise. "Your eyes would pop out of your head if I told you the names of the future movie queens who took off their clothes for my father. I could make a fortune off cable if those films still existed."

"One of them does."

"It's true the cops missed one when they raided the studio. It was being developed in a custom lab at the time. I remember Pop saying something about it, but I don't know if Dixie Day was in it. It wasn't among his stuff when he died."

"You said he made you a loan before he died. May I ask how much it was?"

"A hundred thousand dollars."

Valentino dropped his gaze. He didn't want the glint to show. "That was generous."

"You could have knocked me over with a chorus boy. I never dreamed anyone could put aside that much selling Minoltas to tourists."

"Did he keep records?"

"He was anal about it. I've got three file cases in the basement. You can take a look if you'd like."

Valentino said, "I'd like."

The Montana-Day "ranch"—the Circle M—comprised fourteen acres in the Hollywood Hills, a tract that cost as much as a thousand-acre spread in Texas. The house was a rambling hacienda, 10,000 square feet of pink adobe with a red tile roof. The guard at the gate was got up like an old-time lawman, complete with Stetson and sheriff's star. He was expecting Valentino and waved him on through.

A stout Mexican woman in maid's livery led the visitor to a bright sunroom walled in with glass on three sides, where an old woman awaited him in a wheelchair. She spoke quietly to a younger woman in a nurse's uniform, who left the room on rubber heels.

"I met the original Valentino once, when I was seven years old," said the old woman. "You favor him."

"So I've been told. Thank you for seeing me, Miss Day. Or do you prefer Mrs. Montana?"

"Miss Day will do." The reply held a harsh edge. She had aged well, and skillful makeup disguised most of the ravages of her illness. The turban she wore to cover the baldness caused by radiation therapy was an exotic touch, but he could still see in her that well-scrubbed, all-American quality that had won the simple hearts of Depression audiences. The Wild West Show glitter she wore in public was conspicuously absent from her present costume

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of blouse, slacks, and open-toed shoes. "How is Dick Junior? All grown up and then some, I suppose. His father certainly kept him busy around the set."

Over the telephone, he'd told her he'd spoken with Richard Hennessey. "I was afraid you'd deny knowing either of them," he said.

"You can't make the past go away by pretending it didn't exist. Lord knows I would if I thought it would work."

"I spent two hours in Hennessey's basement going through his father's records. He wrote down everything, even the details of his blackmail."

"That alone proves he wasn't cut out for it. He was desperate to save his son from bankruptcy or he never would have considered it. He came to see me while Red was in L.A., supervising the construction of the museum. He brought a print of the film with him. He offered to show it to me in the screening room, but I said that wouldn't be necessary. I knew what was on it. You saw some of the frame enlargements. I had a good body, don't you think?"

"You were a beautiful woman." He didn't know what else to say.

"Poor Dick. Do you know what he was asking for the film? Ten thousand dollars. I told him he could get ten times that from Red. He said he preferred dealing with me. He was so nervous, and so ashamed. I think he'd have given it to me for nothing if it weren't for Junior's situation. He would have been that glad to be out of it."

"Why didn't you pay him?"

"I couldn't. I don't have any money. The museum, this ranch, all the bank accounts and investment portfolios are in Red's name. I haven't had control of a cent since the day we married. I have to ask him for money to visit the beauty parlor. My husband is a mean, stingy man, Mr. Valentino. And that's not even his worst quality."

Valentino said nothing. He felt he was on the verge of learning something he'd just as soon never know; but the hints Dick Hennessey, Sr., had dropped into his daily journal had started him in a direction he couldn't reverse.

"Red has a violent temper. All our friends think I suffer from migraines. That's what Red tells them when they visit and I'm upstairs waiting for my bruises to heal. In nineteen fifty he threw me down a flight of stairs and told the press I broke my leg when I fell while exercising Cocoa, my mare. I won't go into every incident. It galls him to pay the servants as much as he must to keep them from selling the real story to the tabloids."

"Why didn't you divorce him?"

"Weakness. Pride. Red Montana and Dixie Day is one of the great love stories of Hollywood. Who was I to blow apart the fairy tale? The old studio system made us slaves to our public images. By the time I finally stopped caring, it was too late. You get used to living in hell. That doesn't mean you stop hating the devil."

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Valentino had begun to experience the same dizzy sensation he'd felt at the museum. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"I haven't many weeks left," she said. "I suppose it's the time for confessions."

"*You're* the blackmailer?"

"Only indirectly. I told Dick he could squeeze a hundred thousand out of Red easily. I even helped him work out the details. The only thing my husband has is the pure white image of Red Montana and Dixie Day. It's an icon. He's built his fortune on it; it's his ticket to immortality. I knew if Dick succeeded I'd never hear a word about it from Red. I was right.

"Dick offered to split the money with me," she went on. "I didn't want it, but I did ask him for one thing."

"A print of the stag film."

She smiled a Dixie smile, straight off the milk carton.

"You shouldn't sell yourself short as a detective. I'd planned to release it to an exhibitor when Red died, but fate forced my hand. In a way I was glad. Now I'd get to watch him suffer."

"You sent him the frame enlargements."

"A very old friend of mine made them in the film laboratory at Sony. I felt the need to torment Red. They'll drive him crazy until I'm gone. He'll think he's safe then. What he doesn't know is I've arranged for my friend to make additional prints and send them to every sleazy theater and cable station in Southern California. Let Red try to exploit *that* for his own glory the way he did my terminal cancer. The only thing I've had since our wedding that was truly mine."

She balled her fists on the arms of the wheelchair. Beneath the makeup her face was a naked skull. "Think of it. However long he outlives me, he'll bear the stigma of the has-been cowboy hero who married Jezebel. And when he's gone, the world will be only too relieved to forget us both."

Suddenly Valentino found that sun-filled room in the Hollywood Hills suffocating. He wanted to be anywhere else.

His hostess misinterpreted his discomfort. "I'm sorry, Mr. Valentino. Whatever my husband promised you, I assure you he won't honor it when he hears the truth. You'd be better off telling him you failed. Is there something I can do to make it up to you? I'd offer to autograph a picture, but I don't think it will be worth much for long."

Valentino thought of *Six-gun Sonata,* that monument to chivalry and innocence, as thin as the celluloid it was made of. He didn't think he could watch it, or any Montana-Day picture, without seeing a bloated egomaniac and his battered, bitter wife. He shook his head and left. He didn't breathe easily again until he'd descended into the smog and smut of Los Angeles. ●

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OIL AND WATER

by Michael Z. Lewin

Indianapolis-bred writer Michael Z. Lewin has made his home in England for the better part of the past twenty years. It is simply amazing how keen the author's ear is for dialects that are not native to him—but then, he's been writing radio plays for the BBC for years now. Mr. Lewin's tongue-in-cheek tone doesn't keep us from sympathizing with his characters.

1.

"What was the name again, sir?" The pale, thin desk clerk articulated precisely as he examined his computer screen.

"L-A-V-E-R-bloody-Y. You deaf or what? It's a single room and it's mine for a week."

The clerk looked up. One twenty-five-year-old eyebrow lifted. "We have no 'single' rooms, sir. Accommodation at Clawmonger House is entirely in suites of rooms."

"Then it's a flamin' single suite of rooms. And it's got a bottle of fizz in it. And I'm here for seven bleedin' days. And it's all free. You got that?" Charlie Lavery was not a patient man, and he was less patient than normal when responding to a juvenile with a toffee-nosed accent.

"Ah," the clerk said without looking up. "I've found it. You're the guest of Kingdom Tours. Yes?"

"Which beats being a guest of Her Majesty hands down," Lavery said.

The clerk, unsmiling, engaged Charlie's eyes. "I wouldn't know, sir."

"Well, *I* would," Charlie said. "So whatcha think of that?" Behind the clerk a middle-aged woman with straight black hair striated with gray hunched over a computer keyboard. She appeared not to be listening, but at Charlie's last challenge she glanced at the reception desk with a bemused smile. Charlie took this as encouragement and winked. The woman stiffened and returned to her work.

The pale young clerk offered a pen and said, "Please sign the register here, sir. Or make your mark."

Charlie grabbed the pen and signed the register with a flourish.

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"Now, dipstick, ring for one of your bozos to carry me bag up to me single suite. Put a fiver tip for him on my bill. But nothing for you. And don't think I won't be checking, because I will. Got all that?"

2.

Mae and Francis stood before a stately home so large it struck Mae it might as well be called a castle. "Now that's a bit of all right, don't you think?" she said.

Francis shook his head slowly. "I still don't bloody understand it. How can you win a competition you never bloody entered?"

Mae sighed. The question was important when the tickets arrived in the post, but now it was irrelevant. She had checked it all out. The train tickets, the taxi voucher, the suite reservation. Everything was pukka. Their expenses would be completely covered. Mae might look like a blowzy tart, but her mind was sharp and she thrived on detail.

"But think about it," Francis said. "The bloody taxi took five minutes just coming up the drive from the front gate."

"Have you had to pay a single penny piece for anything yet?" Mae asked. "Have you?"

Francis knew they hadn't, but he said, "A place like this can't be for us, Mae. Not *us.*"

How had they won the prize? Computer error was Mae's best guess. But she didn't care. She knew all about bad luck and making the best of it. It was time to accept some good luck for a change. "So what you planning to do, Frankie?" Mae asked. "Stand out here the whole week long? 'Cause I bloody ain't."

At that moment a man in a frock coat and top hat approached Mae and Francis where they stood beside their holdalls. The man said, "May I assist you, sir? Madam?" He glanced from one to the other. "With directions, perhaps?"

Mae did not like the man's tone. "Is this Clawmonger House?"

"Indeed it is."

"Well, me and Francis is here for the week, so grab them bags and lead us in."

The stunned porter hesitated.

"Don't stand there like a wax dummy, Sunny Jim. Move your arse before I give your bollocks a kick start," Mae said.

Francis, who invariably enjoyed himself most when Mae took charge, found his frame of mind brightening. He took Mae's hand and said, "I thought you gave all that up, luv."

3.

"I had to wait five minutes at the station," Paul Pethey said.

The pale young desk clerk raised his eyebrow. "Sir?"

"I thought you'd want to know, is all," Pethey said.

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"I, sir?"

"You. The hotel and that. What with me being here as a facilities evaluator."

"Beg pardon, sir?"

Pethey pulled a set of documents from inside his jacket. He slapped them on the reception desk.

At the sharp sound, the middle-aged woman behind the clerk turned from her computer. A shock of her graying hair fell over one of her eyes. The clerk said, "And what might these be, sir?"

"Read 'em and weep," Pethey said. "Realm Market Research. They picked me out of the whole bloomin' country to test the quality of the service you give in this hostel. So when I been left standing five minutes at the railway station, I expect you to want to know about it. You wouldn't want me to put in a bad report now, would you? So let's get things clear from the off. I'm more than ready to enter into a little agreement with you. One where you scratches my back and I scratches yours, know what I mean?"

4.

Once Paul Pethey was safely on his way to the east wing, the pale clerk regretted that he hadn't taken a moment to examine the papers Pethey had slapped so fiercely on the reception counter. Realm Market Research? Facility evaluation of Clawmonger House? How extraordinary. Clawmonger House facilities were less in need of evaluation than any in the country, arguably any in the world. And market research? When Clawmonger House's clientele selected itself and it was more likely to be worth seven or eight figures than six?

At least before today. No fewer than three reservations, one after another. All on some kind of gratis week.

The clerk shook his head. But the puzzlement would not shake out. He turned to the woman tapping at a keyboard behind him. "Excuse me, Miss Soames, but something is going on that I don't understand."

"What might that be, Jenkins?" Miss Soames said.

"An influx of guests who are . . . who are not our sort."

"Really?"

"All here for the week. All with expenses prepaid, and all sent by agencies I've never heard of. Kingdom Tours. Highness Holidays. Realm Market Research."

"Good heavens," Miss Soames said. "And not our sort, you say?"

"All . . . common," Jenkins said. "I mean *very* common. Downright vulgar."

"Good heavens!"

"I have been here for nearly three years and I have never served even one guest like these."

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Miss Soames had served Clawmonger House for nearly twenty-three years. She knew only too well the kind of guest Jenkins normally encountered. Clawmonger House might indeed occasionally entertain a vulgarian, but only one who was stinking rich. "What can it mean?" she asked.

"You haven't heard about plans for any . . . you know, changes, have you?" Jenkins asked.

"I?" Miss Soames said.

"You know this place better than anybody. I'd have thought the king would consult you before he . . . you know, did anything drastic." Clawmonger House was now owned by a king who lived in the south wing with his wives when they were in England.

"He would never consult me," Miss Soames said, although silently she agreed that her knowledge of the inner workings of Clawmonger House was unsurpassed.

"Well, the only other thing I can think of is that it's meant to be a bit of a . . . you know, joke," Jenkins said.

"A joke?"

Jenkins nodded. But before he spoke again he looked around to confirm that no one else was within earshot. Even so, he lowered his voice. "Maybe, the king's idea of a joke?"

"Does he have a sense of humor?" Miss Soames asked.

"I don't know," Jenkins said, "But there are the names."

"What do you mean, the names?"

"'Kingdom,' 'Highness,' 'Realm.'"

"I see what you mean," Miss Soames said. "Perhaps you ought to alert Mr. Dunsmore."

"Oh, I'm not sure about that," Jenkins said.

"Why not?"

"Perhaps I might have said something earlier," Jenkins said, "but I was very sorry when they appointed Mr. Dunsmore, Miss Soames. And I'm even sorrier now I've worked with him for three months. I find him very difficult."

"I believe 'exacting' is how he likes to think of himself," Miss Soames said.

"I'm sure I speak for the whole of the under-staff when I say that you deserved the post."

"Thank you, Jenkins," Miss Soames said, "but that's water under the bridge now. We must all strive to give Mr. Dunsmore our full support."

"Miss Soames . . ." Jenkins hesitated. "What would you have done in a situation like this?"

"About the vulgar persons, you mean?"

"Yes."

Miss Soames pursed her full lips. "Well, if these persons do not fit here," she said, "perhaps it would serve everybody's best inter-

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ests if the staff were to behave in such a manner as to help them understand that they would be happier elsewhere."

"Oh yes," Jenkins said, nodding vigorously. "For their own good. Excellent."

"And," Miss Soames continued, "I think it might be wise to keep an eye on the king. To see whether he notices them and, if so, how he treats them. It might give a clue as to what kind of game he's playing at. If, of course, it has anything to do with the king at all."

5.

"Oy," Charlie Lavery said.

"Sir?" the waiter said.

"This fillet steak." Charlie pointed to the meat on his plate. "It's tough."

"Tough?" the waiter said.

"What's the matter? Don't you comprenney English?"

"We have never had a complaint before, sir."

"Well, you got one now. So what you gonna do about it?"

The waiter prodded the piece of beef with his little finger. "Seems tender enough to me. My advice, sir, is that you'd better eat up before it gets cold."

At the nearby table Mae poked Francis. "D'you see that, Frankie?"

"What?" Francis said.

But Mae did not wait for her spouse to respond more fully. She leaned toward Charlie and said, "Pssst," until she had Charlie's attention. "I heard that," Mae said. "The way that waiter bloke treated you was diabolical."

Charlie said, "Well, what d'you expect in a poncey place like this?"

"To tell you the truth," Mae said, "me and Frankie here ain't been getting decent service ourselves. Everything looks great, but the people have been treating us like we're shite, if you'll pardon my pardon."

Charlie said, "They piss me off here. They really piss me off."

Mae said, "You're the first person I've met here who don't talk like he's got a carrot up his beak. What say we have a drink together after the grub. Me and Frankie'll pay. We're on the cuff here."

6.

"What I don't understand," Francis said, "is how you can win a competition you never bloody entered."

"Something's up," Charlie said.

"What you mean?" Mae said.

"Because something like that happened to me and all. No sooner

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do I get back from a holiday courtesy of Her Majesty than I got these tickets through the letter box."

"What tickets?" Francis asked.

"The ones that brought me to this place. I could only figure that it was a little gesture from a business colleague in the Met by way of thanks for not grassing him up. But if the same thing's happened to you . . ."

"We won a competition," Francis said. "Only we never bloody entered no bloody competition."

"Ours was from Highness Holidays," Mae said.

"Mine is from something called Kingdom Travel." Charlie shook his head. "Something here definitely stinks, and it's more than my bloody tough steak."

"Ours was the lasagne," Francis said. "It was cold in the middle."

"I'll tell you something else," Mae said. "Everybody I talk to here is stuck up and snotty and makes me feel about that big." She displayed a minute gap between index finger and thumb.

"You mustn't let the bastards grind you down," Charlie said. "But how many of the rest of them do you think are here on freebies?" They all looked around the lounge.

At that moment Paul Pethey pounded on the bar. "This ain't a double Scotch. I said I wanted a double, damn it. This ain't even hardly a single."

"I believe you will find it to be a double," the barmaid said calmly.

"Are you telling me I don't know how big a bleedin' double is? It ain't just that I been drinking them since I was eleven; I was in the trade for a time meself. Cor blimey, the report I'm going to give about you lot just don't bear thinking about."

"It is a double," the barmaid repeated.

"Well, give me a bleedin' double double then," Paul Pethey said. "It's not like I'm paying for any of this."

7.

After introductions and explanations, Charlie, Mae, Francis, and Paul all retreated to Charlie's room with a bottle of malt whiskey. "The Macallan," Charlie said, toasting his new friends. "All the whisky makers drink this stuff."

"Where'd you hear that?" Paul asked.

"I was banged up with a whisky distiller," Charlie said. "My last spell in the Scrubs."

"You was in the Scrubs?" Paul asked.

"What of it?" Charlie said.

"I ain't never been in the Scrubs. I did my deeds and my time up north, mostly in Durham," Paul said.

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"I was there," Francis said. "But not for a long time, like most."

"A pain in the backside for visiting," Mae said.

"So, all us blokes has been inside," Charlie said. "What's going on? Be kind to ex-cons week?"

"I've had an incarcerated hour or two myself," Mae said. "And now we're all here on freebies," she added thoughtfully. "It ain't no accident."

"I'll axe or dent it before I'm finished here," Paul said. "Because I'm getting right hacked off with being treated like scum just because I don't talk pretty. I been trying to give up the GBH and concentrate on safes and security and that, but the way I feel now I'm ready to make an exception."

Francis said, "In our suite the bloody wardrobe has got a safe in it."

"Yeah, mine too," Charlie said, "if you can call it a wardrobe. I spent three years in a room smaller than the bloody wardrobe in my suite."

Mae sat upright in her chair. She tilted her head.

"You all right?" Charlie said.

"She just got an idea," Francis said. "That's how it takes her. What's up, luv?"

Mae said, "Charlie, you got a speciality?"

"I used to work a lot of deception," Charlie said. "You know, talking my way round your older women. But last time up I drew a terrible heavy stretch because they wanted to make me an example. So while I was in I studied wires. I reckon that I'm a pretty good wire man now. If it's electric, electronic, or whatever, I can crack it."

"That's handy," Mae said.

"What you mean?" Charlie said. "You got a plug you want changing?"

"'Cause my Francis here is a wheel man. If it's got four wheels, Frankie can acquire it and drive it away. And I was thinking."

"What?" Paul asked.

"We're all of us here on some kind of bloody weird holiday, only we're all getting more grief than relaxation. Am I right?"

The men chorused that she was right.

"And," Mae continued, "we all got five more days in this lap of aggravated luxury, if we can last that long. Right? So I think we ought to liven things up a little and make this a working holiday."

There was no noise this time. The men were attentive.

Mae said, "What is it you find where there's luxury?" While the men tried to think, Mae answered the question. "Money is what you find where there's luxury. Wealth. Items of value. I've already seen more jewelry walking round the corridors than in most

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shops, and that's just on the men. And there's got to be sixty rooms in this place."

"Suites," Charlie said. "They only got suites."

"And it's out the back of beyond," Mae continued. "Which means that if something untoward was to happen, there ain't no law round the corner."

"You want to rob somebody," Francis said. "That's what you want to do. I can tell." He turned to the others. "Because Mae knows how to put a job together like nobody else. Every job that Mae puts together comes off like a cordon blew, so long as people does exactly what they're told. Thing of beauty, is Mae's work."

"That's because I only work when I get a good idea," Mae said.

"And are you saying you got a good idea now?" Charlie asked.

"You want to rob some rooms?" Paul asked. "Is that it?"

"I got me a honey of an idea, all right," Mae said. "Only it ain't for robbing a few of the rooms. What we are going to do—and I mean all four of us—we are going to rob the whole bleeding hotel."

The men looked at one another.

Francis said, "Trust my Mae. I've seen this look in her eyes before. I ain't never spent a minute inside from following what Mae said. As long as you do exactly what she tells you, it will all work out."

"Rob the whole bleeding hotel," Charlie said reverently. "That'd show the bastards."

Paul said, "I could certainly use a bob or two."

Smiles grew.

8.

The four "regal" guests' spirits rose. They became positively affable to staff, although the staff continued to be rude in return.

Even Miss Soames found herself to be a beneficiary of the visitors' change of attitude. Charlie took to hanging around the front desk for extended periods.

When things were quiet, Jenkins, the pale young clerk, watched as Charlie chatted with the middle-aged computer operator. And what he could not believe was that Miss Soames began to respond.

Granted, Miss Soames was not a particularly attractive woman. And it was common knowledge at Clawmonger House that her appearance—the whole package of how she dressed and comported herself—had counted against her application to become the hotel's manager when the job fell vacant. For brains, for loyalty, for dedication, for long service, for knowledge of hotel workings, and for staff support, the post should rightfully have been hers without hesitation. But in his wisdom the king and his advi-

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sors had brought Mr. Dunsmore to the hotel from the outside. Miss Soames had not been interviewed.

As far as Jenkins could discern, Miss Soames accepted the decision without a moment's upset. She had certainly returned to her keyboard and worked exactly as she had before. Until now.

This "Charlie" was teasing Miss Soames playfully, and Miss Soames appeared to be pleased by the oaf's attentions. Jenkins found the whole process as amazing as it was unprecedented. He had not forgotten that it was Miss Soames's own suggestion that led to the staff's campaign of rudeness to the four crude outsiders.

Well, if this was the type of person Miss Soames liked, in that way, perhaps it was not such a bad thing for Clawmonger House that she had lost the manager's post.

9.

While Charlie flirted, the others did reconnaissance at Mae's direction. And gradually elements of her plan became evident to them all.

"I get it," Paul said at one point. "If the rooms have safes in them, that helps us."

"Because we don't have to waste time hunting for the valuables that ain't out on the dresser," Mae said. "We know where they are."

Another day Mae said, "Hah!" while she was looking at an Ordnance Survey map.

"What's up, luv?" Francis asked.

"I been worried," Mae said, "because of that five-minute drive from the front gate. Five minutes can be a long time. One police Metro blocking the gate and we could be kippers on a plate."

"Yeah," Francis said, "I wondered about that."

"But this here map has got it sorted. They'll expect us to drive hell for leather to get to the main road. But this map shows there's a track out the back through the woods. It's perfect."

"I'll check it tomorrow," Francis said.

At another meeting Mae said, "Charlie, you're spending more time with that woman behind the front desk than I'd of thought you needed."

"Could be," Charlie said.

"Why?" Mae asked. "Ain't she going for it?"

"She's going for it," Charlie said. "But a bloke misses companionship of the feminine persuasion when he's been locked away and she's the only one round this place that even smiles."

"So long as you're getting the job done," Mae said.

"Sweet as a nut," Charlie said. "And I'll tell you something for nothing. She can't half whizz round on that computer. I might ask her to give me a few lessons, know what I mean?"

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Paul said, "You better not screw this up."

"You just take care of your end," Charlie said. "I know the difference between work and play. And I ain't never had no complaints yet."

10.

Saturday night, their last night at Clawmonger House, was to be *the* night. Following Mae's instructions, everybody reported to the reception desk at seven P.M. and told Jenkins that they would be catching the early Sunday train.

Jenkins did not delay them long. After all, none had any money owing. In his slowest and most articulated voice Jenkins said to each, "I trust you had an enjoyable stay." Paul, Mae, and Francis said nothing in response to this. Charlie said, "Piss awful, except for the company," and then he winked at Miss Soames. Mae saw Miss Soames clearly as she winked back.

Following instructions, everyone went to bed early, to rest up for the four A.M. operation. But back in their suite Mae said to Francis, "I'm a bit worried."

"What about, luv?" Francis said.

"Charlie."

"He's done all right, ain't he?"

"It's that bird he's been buttering. She seems too friendly."

Francis considered. He trusted Mae's intuitions but he said, "Could be she's hard up."

"Maybe," Mae said. "Maybe."

"You're just edgy," Francis said. "I seen it before."

"Maybe," Mae said again. Then she reached to the bedside table and picked up the phone.

"Who you calling?"

Mae shushed him as she pushed a button. "Hello? Front desk? I want a word with that woman what's always there, working at the computer." Mae paused. "Oh. Right." She replaced the receiver. She brushed the hair off her ears.

"What's up?" Francis asked.

"She ain't there. The cadaver kid on the desk says she didn't feel good so she went home." Mae picked up the phone again and dialed a number. "No answer," she said eventually.

"Oh," Francis said. Then, "So what if she's with Charlie. All that means is Charlie'll be more relaxed."

11.

Charlie was very relaxed. He said he'd been asleep and nearly slept through the alarm. Mae didn't believe it was the complete story, but it didn't matter. He performed his allotted tasks perfectly.

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As, indeed, did everyone else.

The job went like a dream.

Francis had a Land Rover at the kitchen door, engine running, spot on time.

Paul set off the fire alarm exactly at four A.M., having disconnected the line that led directly from Clawmonger House to the fire station and to the police. The alarm's bells were loud and penetrative. No one hearing them could possibly wish to be anywhere but outside the hotel, especially after catching a whiff of the smoke from the small fires Mae herself lit in wastebaskets in the corridors of each wing.

The guests made rapid, orderly progress into the grounds. A few guests passed comments about being forced to mix with so many strangers in night attire, but generally the response was exactly what the fire service would have wished it to be, had the fire service known anything about it.

Only the king was reluctant to leave the building, but Charlie, in hotel uniform, was at his most persuasive about the necessity for him to do so. "It wouldn't do for a couple of fire-department Johnnies to carry Your Majesty out by the scruff of the neck, now would it, sire?"

Although the king didn't like it, he saw the point, and left for the fire exit. Charlie thought about adding, "Not quite what you had in mind with your Kingdom, Highness, and Realm, was it?" But with the king shifted, Charlie had more important things to do. First he used a passkey to check each suite and make sure that the south wing had been vacated.

Then he went through the wing again. Inside each suite he scooped exposed valuables into a nylon bag. He also went to the safe in the wardrobe. Each safe he opened with a second passkey. The keys were all products of his courtship of plain Miss Soames.

Mae and Paul had sets of keys as well. Each of them was making a progress through a hotel wing at the same time Charlie was.

Francis, at the kitchen door, loaded everyone's personal luggage into the Land Rover. Then Charlie arrived, closely followed by Paul. Each threw his nylon bag into the vehicle. "Where is she?" Charlie asked.

But Francis was not worried and, sure enough, Mae appeared a few moments later. She heaved her bag into the Land Rover and said, "Let's roll."

Francis had only the moon for light, but his reconnaissance of the track that led out of the back of the estate paid its dividends. The Land Rover made steady progress away from Clawmonger House.

Mae's instruction was that everyone remain silent until they were on a main road. The rule was obeyed for four wilderness

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miles. But then Paul could contain himself no longer. "There must be half a million in my bag. How'd you do?" he whispered.

"At least that," Charlie said. "At least that."

"I can't believe it," Paul said. "There's going to be enough for new lives for all of us. More than enough."

Francis said, "Mae?"

"I'm here, luv," Mae said.

"How much in your bag?" Francis asked.

"Oh, masses," Mae said. "I'd be surprised if there was less than a million."

"Jeez Louise," Paul said.

Francis could not restrain himself. "I told you she was good. Didn't I tell you she was good?"

"You did," Charlie said. "And she is." He patted Mae's back.

Paul, too, patted Mae's back. "Yes!" he whispered. "Yes!" he shouted. The Land Rover rocked with euphoria.

Then Francis said, "Hey."

"Hey to you too, Frankie," Charlie said heartily.

"No," Francis said. "We got a problem."

12.

The headlights, now on, showed that the track was blocked by a tree.

"It's nothing," Charlie said. "We'll soon have it shifted. Come on, Paul." The two men bustled out.

Francis was about to join them when he saw that Mae was frowning. "Don't fret, luv," he said.

"You checked this track," she said. "You said it was clear."

"It was clear. Yesterday, and the day before."

"So why's there a tree across it all of a sudden?" Mae asked.

Francis looked at the tree. Then he looked at Mae. "I don't know," he said.

Mae said, "Go on, help them." But she continued to frown.

Francis hesitated at the door of the Land Rover, but he was unable to think of anything he could say that might reduce his wife's anxiety. So he got out and joined Charlie and Paul. Once they agreed which direction to pull, the three men cleared the track easily.

But the moment the tree was out of the way, a figure in black emerged from the forest. The figure carried a shotgun and it walked directly into the spray of the headlights. "What the hell!" Paul said for them all.

Calmly, the stranger pointed the shotgun at the three men. Slowly and articulately, the stranger said, "Charles, be so kind as to ask Mae to join us."

Charlie hesitated. "Darlin'?" he said. "Is that *you?* 'Cause if it is—"

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Miss Soames lifted the shotgun so that it aimed well above Charlie's head. She pulled the trigger. The noise of the blast was shocking in the silent night. All three men ducked.

Miss Soames said, "Get Mae, Charles. Do it now, or the next shot will be between your legs."

"Bloody hell," Charlie said. He leapt toward the Land Rover, but Mae was already getting out.

"Mae," Miss Soames called, "please stand with Francis and Paul."

"Is that your computer bird?" Mae asked Charlie.

Charlie's grim face answered the question.

Before Mae could comment, Miss Soames said, "Now, Charles, unload all the luggage, except the 'swag' bags. And please, don't demean my intelligence by trying to hang on to one of them." She tapped the shotgun. "I'm well past the point of no return."

"Best you does it like she says, Charlie," Mae said.

Charlie unloaded the Land Rover except for the nylon bags which held the loot.

"Thank you, Charles," Miss Soames said. "Now join your colleagues."

When the four robbers were together, Miss Soames took a black bag from her belt. She lobbed it into the group. The three men all jumped away, but Mae caught it. She opened the bag and withdrew four pairs of handcuffs.

"Lock yourselves to each other," Miss Soames said. "In a circle. Ring-a-ring-a-roses."

"No way," Paul said. "We might as well call the Old Bill ourselves."

"Here is an alternative," Miss Soames said, directing the shotgun at Paul's stomach. "But it's messy."

Mae passed out the handcuffs. "We ain't got much choice. Best we does what she says."

Francis clicked a cuff onto his wrist. "It don't seem natural, but my Mae knows what's what."

Reluctantly, the three men and Mae shackled themselves to each other.

"Good," Miss Soames said. "Now we can relax." She lowered the shotgun so that it pointed to the ground.

But Mae stiffened, and tilted her head.

"She just got an idea," Francis said. "That's how it takes her."

Mae looked at Miss Soames. "It was *you* that brought us here, wasn't it?"

"Was it?" Miss Soames said, but the tone of her voice was not a contradictory one.

"We was handpicked," Mae said. "Each of us with a skill."

"And very good you all were," Miss Soames said with a laugh.

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"But," Mae said, "how could you be sure we'd do the job that we did?"

Slowly, and with her pleasure evident, Miss Soames said, "You were like drops of oil in a bowl of water. Once you were in place in a foreign environment like Clawmonger House, it was inevitable that you would find each other. And then, chances were that you would join together, and that together you would do what you all do best."

"What's she saying, Mae?" Francis said. "What's all this about oil and water?"

"We've been had, Frankie," Mae said. "We've been had, good and proper."

Francis and Paul looked around dumbly. But Charlie said, "You took us to the cleaners, all right, darlin'. And there's a fortune in the bags in the motor. More than a million, we reckon. But think ahead, darlin'. Most of it is in jewels and stuff like that. How are you going to sell them? A girl like you wouldn't know where to begin. You'll need help, from someone you can trust. Someone who knows his way round."

Miss Soames laughed. She said to Mae, "He doesn't get it, does he?"

"Not a clue," Mae said. To Charlie she said, "How do you think she found *us* in the first place?"

"Uh. Well, I don't know. Not exactly," Charlie said.

"In her bloody computer," Mae said. "And if she can get deep enough into police and court records to find our MOs and our specialities and our addresses, how much trouble is she going to have finding all the bleedin' fences she could ever want?" Mae turned back to Miss Soames. "Am I right?"

"Spot on," Miss Soames said.

"The only thing I don't understand," Mae said, "is why you done all this in the first place. Didn't they appreciate you at Clawmonger bloody House? Is that it? Is it a revenge thing?"

Miss Soames said, "Let us just say that if they manage to work it all out they will have a good deal more respect for me than they ever did before."

"But they won't work it out unless they catch us and we tells them," Mae said.

Paul said, "How much friggin' trouble is it going to be to catch us?" He rattled the cuffs on both his wrists.

"I intend to leave you the key," Miss Soames said.

"You do?" Paul said.

"And you've got your luggage. I'm sure Mae can come up with a plausible story to explain why the four of you are hiking with your bags in the middle of the night. What can they charge you with? After all, you won't have any of the loot on you."

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"We could say," Mae said, "that none of us really believed that the Clawmongers wasn't going to make us pay. So we decided to hoof it and not to take any chances."

"I still don't understand how you can win a competition you never entered," Francis said.

"I'll explain it later, luv," Mae said. To Miss Soames she said, "You ought to get a move on."

"True."

"But first I got a proposition to put to you."

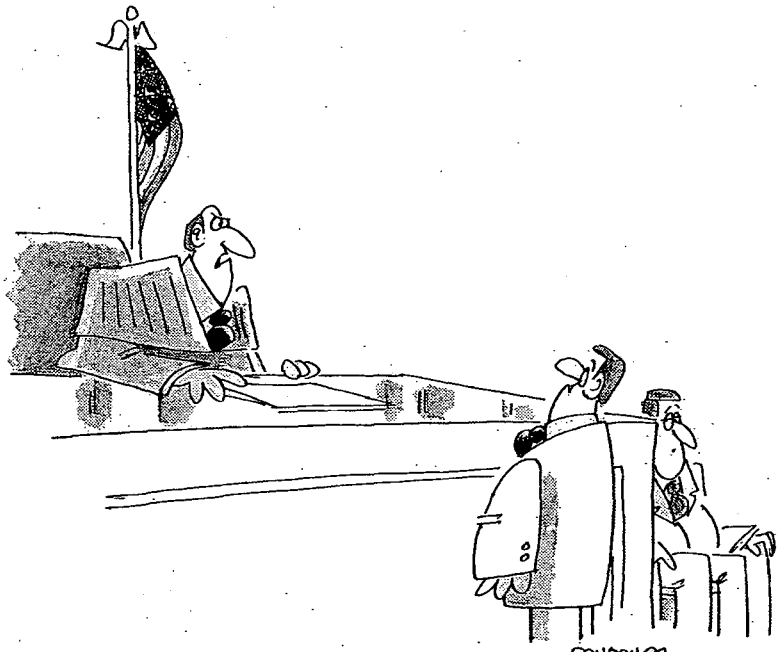
"Oh yes?" Miss Soames said.

"Just at the minute you figure you've got your revenge and enough money to live on for the rest of your life to boot. But if you should ever run out of cash, or just get the fancy to put another job together, think about looking me up, will you? You'll be able to find me on that computer of yours. Because I figures you and me together, we might be able to put together something a bit special."

After a moment Miss Soames said, "That could very well be."

"Just keep me in mind," Mae said, "because I'll sure be keeping you in mind."

Miss Soames laughed. Then she went to the door of the Land Rover and opened it. She turned and threw the key to the handcuffs into the grass near Mae's feet. "Good luck," she called. "And thanks." Then she got in and drove away. ●



"Please refrain from calling it a loco motive." SCHOCH '92

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HUNTING FOR DOYLE

by S. J. Rozan

The rain that stung Sloan's face was almost ice. Frigid water ran down his collar, soaked his shoes; his feet were numb. Jesus, for a cup of coffee—! Still, it was better this way. It would be sweeter, more complete, like running a race in pain. The way it used to be: the races where he thought he couldn't go on, and he went on, and, gasping—sometimes weeping—in the dirt at the finish, he'd found he'd beaten his own best; and felt the wild thrill that came from knowing he'd done that with pain; and that meant he'd won.

God, he used to love to run. When this was over—and this would be over tonight—he'd start running again. He'd find a place to live, something small, maybe just a room, but a place you could come home to, not have to keep moving, live in the flophouses and alleys the way he did now. Sloan knew what this case had brought him to. But when it was over, he was gone: far the hell away from this city, to anywhere, somewhere he'd never been. He'd get a job. He wasn't crazy. He knew he'd never be a cop again. But just a job, a new start. He'd—

"Will you?"

Sloan went cold in his bones, in his heart. Some would have said it was just the voice of the city at night, the hiss of the wind pushing through the rain; but Sloan knew, always knew who that was.

"Robbie—" Sloan spoke to the sky, the emptiness and the lashing rain. Only the one word; and the wind tore the word away. Sloan wanted to plead, *I'm sorry.* He wanted to yell, *Stop, leave me alone!*

Over the past three years, New Yorker S. J. Rozan has been ascending to the top of her profession as a writer. Beginning in 1996 when *EQMM* published her Edgar-nominated story "Hoops," she's gained increasing recognition from awards committees: the Shamus Award for Best Novel, for *Concourse* (St. Martin's/ '95); a Shamus Award nomination for *No Colder Place* (1997); and the Anthony for Best Novel *(No Colder Place).* †

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Always, when Robbie came to him, always when the hissing whisper started, those were the things Sloan wanted to say. But Robbie, with the rain sheeting the blood that pumped from his torn heart—a year ago, that night, it had been raining too—Robbie had whispered, "It's not your fault," before Sloan could say he was sorry.

It *was* his fault. Sloan knew where he should have been, and hadn't been there; what he should have done, and hadn't done it. When it went down, when Doyle burst from the door and charged them howling, firing—Sloan could swear, *laughing*—Sloan scrambled but it was too late and Robbie went down.

Doyle had run, still laughing, into the storm, the shrieking wind and pounding rain, and vanished. Robbie had died.

Now Robbie came to Sloan, not only in dreams, not just in the solitary, silent hours; but he stood before him on crowded sidewalks, sat with him in bars, followed him to the beds of women Sloan went home with hoping—and it never worked—to find some peace just *once,* just for *now.*

Sometimes Robbie spoke; sometimes he didn't. It never mattered; Sloan knew what he wanted.

Tonight, he'd have it.

See, Robbie? Sloan pleaded silently. *I'm here, I've been here all night. It's freezing, man, I'm soaked, but I'm here, I'm not moving. Because that bastard is in there.*

He was: Doyle was there, in that house, that place across the street that looked like any other. Sloan knew that as surely as he knew his name. As surely as he knew that, when he did this for Robbie, when he pumped three bullets into that bastard's chest, one for each one that had cut through Robbie, this would be over.

A year. A year of one-word phone calls, late-night meetings on deserted street corners. A year, as fall turned to winter, then the softness of spring and the steam of summer, and now again November, chill and wet, a year of paying for leads that were worthless, of shaking down snitches, following trails that went nowhere. A year when four times now Sloan had thought, had been *sure,* he'd had him, had *felt* those three bullets rip through Doyle's chest, had known he'd be free—and then the whisper in the empty sky: "Not yet. No, partner, not yet," and he knew it wasn't over.

And he'd start again: another call, another lead, another path.

Oh, he was a bulldog. He'd always been; that was the book on him, as a cop. They'd thrown him off the job, in the end, because of Doyle. Because he wouldn't give it up. How the hell could he give it up? This was who he was. He was Sloan, the guy who tracked them down, who brought it home. A year ago, he'd messed up bad, let Robbie down. But he'd make it up to him: now, here, tonight.

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This lead was good. Sloan could feel it. *Oh, Robbie,* he said, *Look, man, I'm here, in the rain, in the cold, and this one's good.*

The door opened across the street, spilling sickly yellow light through the night. One man came out; one stayed behind. That one, the one still in there, would be Doyle.

Sloan moved with great care. Word on the street, whispers and rumors, had brought him here, because the deal going down here tonight was Doyle's kind, had his name stamped all over it. But Sloan had been a cop: He knew he wasn't the only one with ears on the street.

In this city, some deals went down because the Department didn't know, and some because it didn't care; but some were watched, and some were stopped. If there were cops here tonight, they'd be looking to take up Doyle. Sloan didn't want him taken up. He wanted to watch him bleed and die, because that was what he owed to Robbie, nothing else and nothing less.

Carefully, using the rain for cover, avoiding the headlights of drifting cars, Sloan slipped up the block, across the street, down the block again. You didn't come up on a place like this straight on, not if you were good. Sloan had always been good.

His eyes were on the house the whole time, but he knew Doyle wouldn't leave. Doyle always stayed behind after the deal, sent everyone away and liked to be alone with his kilos, with the poison he was putting on the street. Robbie had said: Poison pushing poison; and he'd laughed. Sloan spat into the rain-choked gutter.

He came up to the house from the back. From across the street he'd seen the other man and the kilos and Doyle framed in the front window, knife-edged black shadows cutting through the yellow-lit room. Sloan knew, because he'd spent so long looking for him, so many hours, days, months following and studying and coming close to him, knew Doyle would still be in there, in that front room.

Sloan slipped noiselessly up to the door in the back.

He took out his picks and started working the lock. Maybe there was an alarm; Sloan didn't give a damn. By the time Doyle heard it, by the time he wheeled around, fear twisting his face as he saw who was in his house, in his room, it would be too late. Sloan would give him time, just enough to be sure he *knew,* and then he'd shoot.

The lock gave easily. Sloan held the knob as he eased the door open, then shut, so Doyle wouldn't hear the click. Moving silently across the kitchen, Sloan felt how warm the house was, heard how quiet without the pounding of the rain.

Without a sound, Sloan reached the front room. Doyle stood, back to the door, at a table piled with plastic-wrapped white bricks of junk.

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Sloan, behind him, didn't breathe, didn't move. Oh God, for this moment to go on forever—but this wasn't it, not yet.

"Doyle."

He said it softly, almost a whisper, like the insistent, incessant whispers of this past year.

"Doyle."

The man's back stiffened. He spun around. Eyes wide, his hand frozen in mid-reach when he saw Sloan's gun out and trained on him, he stammered, "What the hell is this? Who are you?"

He'd changed. His face was very different, thinner, paler; his eyes seemed deeper set, and his hair darker. Sloan might not have recognized him. Still, Sloan smiled.

"Sloan," he said evenly. "You killed my partner."

Doyle's eyes darted from Sloan's face to the gun, back again. He licked his lips. "No, man, no, not me. I never killed no one."

"You killed Robbie," Sloan said. "Like this," and he fired.

The first bullet slammed Doyle back across the table. A crimson circle blossomed on his chest. Doyle slumped slowly forward to his knees, his hand pressed over the growing red stain. The bullet must have gone right through him: a cloud of heroin from a torn-open brick puffed into the air. Sloan was pleased.

Doyle looked up at him, started to speak, and Sloan fired the second shot. Doyle jerked back and crumpled to the floor beneath the table. From his open mouth came silence, then a long, guttural moan. His eyes were still on Sloan's as Sloan shot him the third and final time.

There, Sloan said silently, speaking to the air and the night. *Robbie, look. That's him, his blood, him, dead, right there. I got him for you. Now it's over.*

Sloan stood in the silent room, just looking at Doyle, at the end of it, for a long time. Then he holstered his gun—he was still using his service revolver; they hadn't had it in them to take that away from him—and, kneeling, picked up Doyle's automatic. He was thinking it was a good gun, maybe he'd keep it, when a thump rattled the front door. A shout: "Police! Open up!"

Sloan froze.

He glanced once more at Doyle, lifeless in his own blood. Then he started for the back, the door he'd come in.

He didn't make it. Another shout of "Police!" and the front door splintered in. Sloan spun around as a pudgy young cop, soaked from the rain, burst in, gun held two-handed. "Drop it!" he yelled, while the chill air and the drum of the rain poured toward Sloan through the open doorway.

Sloan raised his hands slowly, his right one still holding Doyle's automatic. He smiled. "No," he said to the cop—no one Sloan knew, a kid, obviously new and green—"it's okay. You had the

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place staked out? Or you got a call, shots-fired?"

Suspicion filled the young cop's face, but he said, "A call. Just put the gun down."

Sloan smiled again, with satisfied relief this time. The Department hadn't been on to this one. If he, Sloan, hadn't been here, Doyle would have gotten away.

"That's Tom Doyle," he said. He gestured with the gun at the body on the floor. "You guys have been looking for him for a long time."

The young cop's eyes widened. For a few moments, nothing. Then: "Jesus," he said. "You're Sloan."

Sloan nodded. The cop knew who he was; well, that wasn't surprising. "I found him for you," he said. "I had to take him out. He went for this." He showed Doyle's gun to the young cop. The cop stepped back.

"Put it down!"

"It's okay," Sloan repeated. "I got him for you."

"Put the gun down!"

"Doyle went for it—"

"That's not Doyle!"

Sloan cocked his head. Of course; how would this kid know it was true? That Sloan had finally brought Doyle down? He started to explain, to tell the kid about the stakeouts, the phone calls, the street corners and the leads he'd bought; started to, but the young cop cut him off.

"Doyle's dead!" He kept his gun on Sloan, spoke louder than he had to, like a man talking to someone who speaks a different language. "You put three bullets in him the night he killed your partner. He never made it to the end of the block."

Sloan smiled for a third time; this kid, he was confused. He must have heard the stories of that night, of what had happened a year ago in the pounding rain, and gotten it wrong.

"No," he said, "this is him. I've been looking for him for a year."

"He's dead!" the kid repeated, belligerent now. "I don't know who the hell this is, but it's not him. We've been looking for *you* for a goddamn year, Sloan, ever since we found the first asshole shot up like this. Now drop the gun!"

Sloan glanced at Doyle's face: colorless, eyes open, seeing nothing. Of course that was him. He'd changed, that's all. A year later . . .

"No," said the whisper.

The room became ice. Sloan looked around wildly. *Robbie?* he asked silently. *Robbie? It's him. Isn't it him?*

"No," the whisper said again. *"Not this one, partner."*

Robbie—

"Not yet, partner, not yet."

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Slowly, Sloan nodded. He understood.

With barely a flick of the wrist—he'd always been good—he pointed the automatic and shot the young cop through the heart.

Surprise filled the kid's face. He fell to his knees; then he crumpled motionless to the floor.

"Jerry!" A loud, panicked shout from behind Sloan, from the back door. Pounding from there, and another shout: "Police! Open up!"

Sloan worked fast. Bending down, he wrapped the dead drug dealer's hand—the hand of the man who was not Doyle—around the automatic. He put his own gun on the floor by the young cop, picked the cop's up. Department-issue .38s, they were all the same. They'd look to see that the slugs in the dealer came from this gun; no one would check whether this gun was the kid's.

The back door flew open.

"Jerry!" called the wild-eyed cop framed there. "Oh, Jesus!" Then: "Freeze!"

But Sloan was already out the front door by then, and the young cop's partner, though he fired three shots, had no chance of hitting him. Sloan was good. He dashed, zigzagging, through the rain, cut through a yard, over a fence. He laughed with the exhilaration of escape, and in the rain, in the wind, he heard Robbie laughing too.

It's okay, partner, Sloan thought, his legs pumping, breathing deep as he ran. The cold air cut into his lungs. His legs started to ache and burn, but he forced them to keep going. *Robbie, it's okay. I got a lead today, I heard something. This one's good, I can feel it; as soon as it's light, I'll follow it up. I'll get him for you, Robbie. I swear I will.*

Sloan, alone on the street, heard the silence of the city at night, the hiss of the wind through the rain. He headed for a place he knew was safe, an alley they wouldn't come to. He'd shelter there until morning, then head out again, hunting for Doyle. ●

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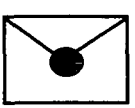

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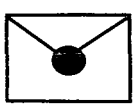

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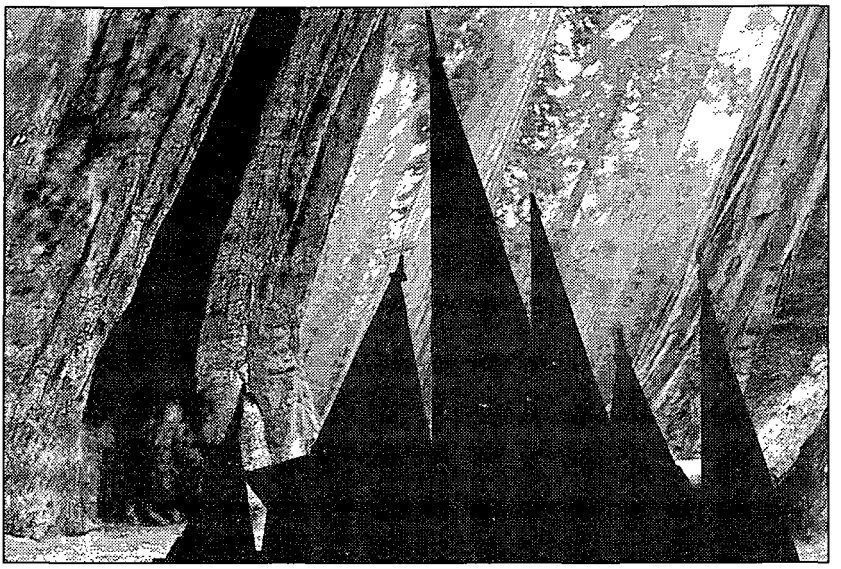

Art by Shirley Chan

MASTER OF MIRACLES

by Edward D. Hoch

"Have you ever heard of Thaddeus Lusk?" my old friend Simon Ark asked me on the telephone one day in late summer.

"Lusk? I don't believe so." I was semiretired from my editorial duties at Neptune Books, but still doing some manuscript reading at home. Simon's call had caught me half napping over a first novel about childhood innocence, and I was thankful for the wake-up call. "Who is he?"

"He used to be a stage magician and performance artist in his younger days, one of those people who painted their bodies blue and rolled around on stage. Now he's in California and has started a new religion. They call themselves the Luskites."

"I guess California is the place for new religions."

"My friend, I have had reports that this religion is more devilish than sacred, with false healings that sometimes cause deaths. I must go out there to see for myself. I would be grateful if you favored me with your company."

My wife Shelly was resigned to my eternal travels with Simon, and this time when I told her she merely shrugged and said, "I suppose

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California is better than Tibet, or some of the other places he's taken you."

"He's never taken me to Tibet."

"He probably will, any day now."

Thaddeus Lusk's new religion had its headquarters in the redwood country of northern California, along the narrow coastal fog belt where tall trees and giant conceits seemed to grow side by side. Simon and I flew to San Francisco and rented a car at the airport, driving north along the rocky Pacific coast for hours before reaching our destination.

Returning once again to his first series character, the two-millennia-old Satan-hunter Simon Ark, Edward D. Hoch spins a yarn involving slight-of-hand and magic. The magnificent redwood country of California is the setting for a seemingly impossible crime, but the occult Mr. Ark is adept at finding rational solutions, too.

No one seemed to know how the town of Pineapple Grove had gotten its name. There certainly had never been pineapples grown anywhere in the area. Some thought the original settlers had called it Pine Apple Grove, with the first two words being combined over time. There was no motel in the town, and we were lucky to get a twin-bedded room at a bed-and-breakfast. The proprietors, Sarah and Wayne Hammond, were a middle-aged couple who seemed to enjoy welcoming newcomers to their home. Sarah showed us our second-floor room, scurrying about to puff up the flowery pillows on the chairs.

"This your first visit to redwood country?" she asked.

"Indeed it is," Simon Ark told her. "This is a lovely area."

"We think so." If she found anything odd about his black suit and ancient, lined face she made no comment on it.

"My friend here is a New York editor," he said, no doubt hoping that the word *editor* would mean *newspaper reporter* to her.

"That so?" She fluffed another pillow.

"We've come to interview a man named Thaddeus Lusk. Do you know him?"

She crossed herself as if he'd spoken a taboo name. "We don't talk about him."

Later, after we'd unpacked and ventured downstairs to the sitting room, Simon brought up the subject again with Wayne Hammond. "I'm sorry if I upset Mrs. Hammond earlier by mentioning Thaddeus Lusk."

"It's not a popular name with her," Hammond admitted. "She thinks he's the Devil himself. I just think he's a sick man with delusions that he's God or the Devil. I don't know which."

"The Devil?" That perked Simon up at once. It was what he'd

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traveled across the country to hear. Ever since I'd first known him, Simon Ark had been claiming he was a two-thousand-year-old Coptic priest, wandering the world in search of Satan. I viewed him more as a highly intelligent sleuth of the occult, a still-vigorous man in his seventies who'd written a couple of books for my company on Satanism and witchcraft. As far as I knew, the dwindling royalties on those books had been his sole source of income over the years. (But hadn't he seemed a vigorous man in his seventies when we first met, decades ago?)

"Lusk lives in a redwood temple and calls himself the Master of Miracles," Wayne Hammond continued. "When his followers gather there they chant and wear aqua-colored robes. Then he gets up on a stage, does a few magic tricks, and cures people."

"You sound as if you've seen all this."

"No, sir, not me! But there's a lad here in town who got himself an aqua robe and sneaked in there a few months back. He told us about it."

Simon Ark smiled slightly. "I would be grateful for the name of this person, and where I might find him."

Sarah Hammond had entered the room, and she responded before her husband could speak. "His name is Gerry Webster. He owns the Quik-Fill gas station down the street, and he's no lad. He's twenty-eight years old."

"Still a lad to me," her husband argued.

It was dinnertime, but since the Hammonds supplied only breakfast to their guests, we went in search of nourishment in town. They'd directed us to the Redwood Cafe and I wondered how many of those there might be in this neck of the woods. On the way we passed the Quik-Fill, which had a drive-thru car wash next to it, but a sign in the window announced the station was closed from six to seven, apparently a one-man operation.

The Redwood Cafe was a plain, uncluttered room with a dozen tables and a bar at one end. About half the tables were occupied, and three men stood at the bar. I had a thought. "Simon, if Gerry Webster just took a break for dinner he might be here eating it, unless he lives close enough to drive home."

It was an idea. When the tired blond waitress got around to taking our order, Simon asked her, "Is Gerry Webster here tonight?"

She glanced around. "Sure, that's him in the black T-shirt and jeans at the bar."

He was chatting with two men, and when they left I went over to speak to him. "Mr. Webster? Gerry Webster?"

He glanced around. His face was nicely tanned; his hair seemed bleached by the summer sun. "That's me. What can I do for you?"

I led him over to the table and introduced Simon Ark. He sat down to join us and ordered a beer from the waitress. Simon came

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right to the point. "I understand you have had some contact with Thaddeus Lusk."

"You mean that nut case up in the woods? The Master of Miracles? Yeah, I went out there once."

"Could you take us there?"

"What for?" he asked with a trace of suspicion.

"My friend here is a New York editor," Simon explained vaguely, as if that answered the question.

"What, one of those tabloid things? Sure, I guess I could show you the way. Lusk doesn't go in for sex orgies, though, if that's what you're expecting. He's more into magic tricks and miracle cures."

"You've attended his services?"

"Just once. My girlfriend Kelly used to go up there with her mother before the old lady died. She had one of those aqua robes so I wore it one night and crashed the party. Only it wasn't much of a party. Lusk came out and talked for a half-hour about cleansing ourselves, and he did his healing. Then he threw a few fireballs at the stage like a magician and ended up commanding a shower of rain to fall out of the darkened sky and douse those little fires. He said the fires were Satan's work and the rain, like our aqua robes, signified the goodness and power of the Lord. It was a pretty spectacular conclusion, if you buy that stuff."

"What about the healing?" Simon asked.

"A few people came up on crutches. One woman was in a wheelchair. He told them it might be a few days before they felt the full effects of his healing hands. Then, of course, Lusk took up a collection. They always do that, don't they?"

"When is the next service scheduled?"

"Tomorrow night. They're every Tuesday, with special ones now and then."

"Could you take us there?" Simon asked. "Before the service, so I could speak with Lusk if possible."

"I couldn't. Maybe Kelly could. He doesn't even know me."

"Could you ask her for us?"

"Well—I suppose so. I'll be seeing her tonight after I close. Come by the station in the morning and I'll let you know."

After dinner, Simon and I strolled around the three or four blocks of the town, looking in store windows. There seemed little else to do. At one point a car went by and I thought I saw Sarah Hammond behind the wheel, heading back home to her bed-and-breakfast. By the time we arrived there a short while later, she and her husband were in the parlor watching television together.

"This town is not exactly the liveliest place on earth," I told Simon the following morning as I watched a trailer truck loaded with logs driving along the highway in front of the house.

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"You've been spoiled by New York, my friend. I have a feeling the pace will pick up once we meet with Thaddeus Lusk."

"What kind of a name is Thaddeus, anyway?"

"He was one of the twelve Apostles," Simon reminded me.

"Oh, that Thaddeus."

Our breakfast of ham and eggs with sourdough bread was quite filling, and over coffee Wayne Hammond asked us, "Did you talk to that lad at the gas station last night, about Mr. Lusk?"

I nodded. "We're going back this morning. He may be able to help us." Mrs. Hammond said nothing and I wondered if she'd seen us when she drove through town.

Webster's girl, Kelly Block, worked at the tourist center in town, and she'd arranged to stop by the gas station on her lunch hour to meet us. Promptly at noon, she drove up in a ten-year-old Ford with a dull blue paint job. The license plate read TREE-1 in dark letters against a white background. She was about Webster's age, with long brown hair and a ready smile, and wore a badge on her khaki shirt promising *Redwood Tourist Information.* A button on the other side read *Hug a Tree.*

Gerry Webster introduced us and Kelly said, "Hi, you the folks want to meet Thaddeus Lusk?"

"We are," Simon replied.

"It's not easy. He has bodyguards around him at all times. But we can give it a try tonight if you'd like, before the service at eight. Why don't you meet me back here at seven? It's only a fifteen-minute drive to the temple." She turned to Gerry. "You want to come, too?"

He shook his head. "I have to keep the station open till nine. Have fun without me."

Simon and I spent the afternoon driving around the countryside, enjoying the grandeur of the Pacific and the back roads that snaked through the towering majesty of redwood country. We saw no sign of Lusk's temple in the woods, nor any people wearing aqua robes. Returning for another dinner at the Redwood Cafe, I noticed that our rental car was covered with dust from traveling on those dirt roads during our afternoon excursion. It was not quite six o'clock and the drive-thru car wash seemed to be still open, though no workers were in sight.

"Is that your place, too?" I asked Gerry Webster.

"No, no. Fellow name of Murphy runs it. Sort of a loner, a Vietnam vet who drifted up here after the war. There are others in the hills, they say, but I stay away from them. Murphy's harmless, though. There he is now."

He was a man of indeterminate age, scowling at us over a growth of red beard. Dressed in an old army fatigue jacket and pants, he sauntered forward and asked, "You want a car wash?"

"I think we need one," I answered.

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"That's seven dollars for a plain wash, just the outside. We also offer a five-dollar noonday special. There's a vacuum cleaner and cloths at the other end if you want to do more. Stay in the car and close your windows." I paid him the seven bucks and he hit a button on the wall behind him. The noisy mechanism sprang to life. I put the car in neutral and took my foot off the gas. We started moving forward on the track. First there was a watery spray from all directions, followed by globs of liquid soap and agitation by a battery of long felt strips that seemed to dance over the car. We could see nothing through the windows as the curtain of cloth pennants struck at us again and again. Then the car forced its way between pairs of whirling brushes that cleared our vision. Dryers bathed the car in warm air and we burst through a final curtain of cloth into daylight.

"Better than a fun house," remarked Simon, confessing he'd never been through a car wash before.

"Never?" I was astounded.

He shrugged. "I don't drive a car. Why would I need a car wash?"

We drove away without bothering to vacuum the interior or towel off a few remaining streaks of water. I circled the block and came up to park in front of the Redwood Cafe. By the time we'd eaten a light dinner and returned to the Quik-Fill, Kelly Block was already there. She was dressed as she had been earlier and I asked, "No robe for the services?"

She grinned. "It's in the car. But I don't have anything for you two. I'll get you through the gate as my guests." She told us she'd have to drive, so I climbed into the backseat, leaving the front one for Simon. As she pulled away she waved to Webster and called out that she'd see him later.

"How long have you been a Luskite?" Simon asked her when we were under way.

"I've never really been one," she answered easily. "It was my mother who thought his curing powers might help her."

"Was it cancer?"

She nodded. "He told her to cease medication and rely on him, but his cures didn't work. She was dead in three weeks, and I watched her die. That was last winter. I should have quit then, but I've still been coming around."

"Mrs. Hammond believes Lusk to be the Devil," Simon remarked.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far."

She'd turned off the main highway onto a road that wound through the woods, virtually shutting off what sunlight remained. "It's not far now."

Presently we came to a fence with an open gate. A burly man in an aqua-colored robe stood blocking our path. She gave him her name and told him we were guests from New York who wanted to interview Thaddeus Lusk. The guard produced a cellular phone

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from beneath his robe and tapped in a number. He spoke a few words, listened, and then waved us through.

The temple came into view at the next turn, lighted in the near-darkness by a line of luminarias that stretched down the road and around the main building, a low, churchlike structure of redwood logs topped by six wooden spires of equal height. A small stage seemed to occupy the area in front of the place. Kelly followed the road around the temple to a log house that seemed to match it on a smaller scale. There was some parking here, though it was obvious the main parking area was in front.

Another muscular guard like the one at the gate ushered us inside and almost at once we were in the presence of Thaddeus Lusk. Somehow he was not at all what I'd expected, no embodiment of evil, no horns growing from his forehead. In his aqua robe he reminded me just a bit of the traditional depiction of a medieval monk, short and stocky, with a halo of white hair fringing his otherwise bald head. "You have brought me visitors, Kelly?" he asked.

She introduced us and I thought I saw Lusk flinch just a bit at the mention of Simon Ark's name. "Have you come for tonight's service?" he asked us.

"Certainly we will be interested in seeing it," Simon replied.

Lusk smiled slightly. "Are you a religious man, Mr. Ark?"

"I am a seeker after the truth. I thought I might find it with the Master of Miracles."

"You have come to the right place for your interview. Anything I can tell you about the Luskite faith—"

Simon hesitated a moment and then asked, "Why are there six identical wooden spires atop your temple?"

"The Luskite doctrine holds that each human being is endowed with five senses plus another, the so-called sixth sense."

"But the number six has other connotations," Simon went on. "Repeated three times, as in six-six-six, it becomes the number of the Devil."

"Is that so?" Thaddeus Lusk said, wide-eyed as an innocent child. "Imagine that!"

"People tell me there have been messages on the Internet accusing you of being Satan himself."

"No, no, no!" The little man threw up his hands in disbelief. "I am only a poor magus attempting to spread the word of the spirit and the senses. Those who say otherwise are heretics!"

"You are a former magician and performance artist," Simon said with a touch of accusation in his deep voice. "I imagine your magical trappings are no more than stage trickery designed to fool the gullible."

Lusk merely smiled benevolently. "Come and see for yourself. I must prepare for the evening service now. We can continue

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with the interview later."

We followed him outside where cars were beginning to fill the parking area. Kelly whispered, "He's going to be very upset when he learns you're not really doing an interview. This might be the end of my days as a Luskite."

"Would that bother you?" I asked.

"Not particularly."

Since there was no place to be seated, it was obvious that the congregation stood during the service, which Kelly assured us was fairly brief. "There's a great deal of milling around and talking afterward," she said. "Here comes Mr. Hines. He always does the opening."

"Who's he?"

"Drew Hines, Lusk's deputy. He's in charge of the church's business operations."

Simon watched the slender blond man come onto the stage, moving toward the microphone. Like everyone else except Simon and me, he wore the trademark aqua robe of the Luskites. Drew Hines adjusted his glasses and began reading a few short announcements, mainly work assignments for the coming week. Then he introduced Thaddeus Lusk as the congregation took up a low chant of welcome. At that point I guessed there were about two hundred people in the congregation. It wasn't a huge crowd by any means, but given the location, in the middle of the woods, it was pretty impressive. "Some of them drive fifty miles or more to be here on Tuesday nights," Kelly Block told us when I commented on it.

As the chanting died down, Lusk held up his hands for silence and began to speak. His sermon was more an appeal for money than anything else, pointing out that a famous (unnamed) film star had recently joined the church and would attend their Tuesday evening service some week in the future. The celebrity had given a generous donation to the Luskites, and it was hoped that others would do likewise. Then Lusk held up his hands and instructed those in need of healing to come forward. One man with a cane and a bad limp seemed to walk better after Lusk laid on his hands, but others were warned that the cure was not an immediate thing and was tied to continued prayer and fasting. I wondered to whom they were supposed to direct their prayers, since God hadn't been mentioned. As the curing ended, the cadre of guards moved quickly among the congregation with their collection baskets.

Lusk said a few more words, announcing to murmurs of surprise that a special service would be held on Thursday evening to make an important announcement. Then he went into his concluding fireball routine, hurling what appeared to be flaming darts. As they struck the stage, six little fires rose at or near the spots, obviously fueled by a propane gas line under the flooring. Then Lusk stepped forward and raised his hands to the starlit

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heavens above. "Let the aqua of our robes and the purity of our deeds bring forth the waters of salvation to quench these fires of the damned before they consume us all!" he commanded.

Almost at once, rain began falling from the cloudless sky, drenching both Lusk and the stage as the half-dozen fires died to nothing. The congregation chanted its approval. "That was spectacular," I admitted. "Does he end every service like that?"

Kelly nodded. "Unless the weather is bad and we have to go into the temple."

People were greeting each other and congregating in small groups as Lusk returned to his house with Drew Hines and one of the bodyguards. We followed along and, once inside, we waited while the Master of Miracles changed into some dry clothes.

"Miss Block," Simon asked, "have you ever been out here in the daytime?"

"Of course. Many times."

"I could see there are no trees above that stage. Is there anything else up there?"

"Nothing but the sky," she replied. "And one of those bird screens."

"Bird screen?" he questioned.

"You must have seen them along the coast or in Florida. Resort hotels often have them over their swimming pools. They're a dome-shaped construction of thin plastic wires, almost invisible to the eye but they keep birds out. Lusk doesn't like birds interrupting his services."

The Master of Miracles joined them after a few moments. He'd shed his wet aqua robe and was wearing a white terrycloth one instead. "Did you like my closing?" he asked with an impish grin.

"Very effective," Simon admitted. "You should have remained on the professional stage."

"Now on with the interview," Lusk said, settling into one of the chairs.

Kelly Block cleared her throat. "I have to tell you something, Mr. Lusk. I brought Simon Ark and his friend here under somewhat false pretenses. They're connected with Neptune Books in New York, but not with any news magazine. This is not an interview as such."

His face seemed to harden at her words, and I feared she'd gotten herself in big trouble. "You know our rule against strangers, Kelly, and you know the penalty."

"Yes. I'm sorry."

"Please leave."

She got to her feet, telling us, "I'll wait in the car." Her face had the frightened look of a trapped rabbit.

"We should be going, too," I said, but Simon remained seated, his eyes on the little man.

"I hope you don't intend to punish her for bringing us," he said.

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Thaddeus Lusk closed his eyes for a moment, as if communing with a voice only he could hear. "It's out of my hands now. Kelly Block will be gone by noon tomorrow."

"Gone? What does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said. Good night, gentlemen." He turned and left the room.

Kelly was waiting for us in the car, but Simon Ark would not tell her exactly what Lusk had said. "It may have been a threat of some sort. I'm not certain. In any event, I think you should be very careful for the next day or so."

"I'm always careful," she replied, joining the line of cars that was beginning to leave the parking area. "He won't do anything."

But she fell silent during the brief drive back to Pineapple Grove. When she dropped us at our rental car she said simply, "Maybe I'll see you around tomorrow." Then she was gone.

When we got back to our room Simon suggested I phone Gerry Webster at his home and tell him about the possible threat against Kelly. I tried not to alarm Webster, but he said he'd drive over and check up on her.

The following morning we breakfasted again with the Hammonds, and Wayne wondered how long we thought we'd be there. "Do you need the room for someone else?" I asked.

"No, it's not that. We just heard you were out to the Luskite service last night. My wife and I don't get involved with cults and things like that. We're churchgoing Methodists."

"Who was it that saw us there?" Simon asked.

Wayne Hammond didn't want to answer. It was his wife who said, "Mr. Murphy from that car-wash place. Sometimes he drives out to the services. He phoned this morning to say he saw both of you there with that tourist lady, Miss Block."

"We had a brief conversation with Thaddeus Lusk," I admitted. "Simon here is a student of miracle cures and we were interested in seeing him."

Hammond stared hard at Simon's lined face. "If you'll pardon me for saying it, you seem a bit old for a student."

"Oh, one is never too old to learn, Mr. Hammond. As for our stay here, I would guess another day or two. We should be gone by the weekend."

"Murphy says there's to be another service tomorrow night," Sarah Hammond said. "Will you be going to that one, too?"

"We may, if we're still in town."

I was anxious to get away from the Hammonds' after breakfast, and we drove down the street to the few shops clustered around the restaurant. In a souvenir and gift shop I found just about everything that could possibly be made from a redwood tree, and

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finally chose a small square mirror set off by a wide polished wood frame. It looked like something Shelly would like. As we were leaving the shop, Simon noticed Gerry Webster just opening his Quik-Fill station down the road. We drove down there and Simon asked him, "Is Kelly all right?"

"She's fine. She was a little nervous last night so I stayed with her and followed her in to work this morning. That's why I'm a bit late opening."

"Is she coming here this noon?"

"I think so. She often does. Why do you ask?"

Simon grew serious. "I didn't tell you last night, but Lusk said she'd be gone by this noon. It wasn't clear what he meant."

"She's certainly safe at her tourist office."

I suggested that Simon and I take a ride down there to be sure. "Which way is it?"

Gerry Webster pointed. "Five minutes north, a log cabin on the left with a big sign. You can't miss it."

Her blue Ford was parked in front and we could see her through the window, explaining something on a map to a couple of women. "I guess it's a false alarm," I said.

"Wait, my friend. It's more than an hour until noon. Let us park here and watch."

We parked and watched and nothing happened. I was beginning to think this whole journey had been a waste of time. At five minutes to twelve, Kelly came out and got into the Ford with the TREE-1 license plate. "What now, Simon?"

"Follow her, not too close."

I thought she was heading directly to the Quik-Fill, but as we approached she suddenly turned into the car wash behind another vehicle. I remembered Murphy's noontime special and saw her reach out the window to hand him five dollars. "What now?" I asked. Another car was already in line behind her.

"Follow her through the car wash but let me out here. I want to be watching the other end when she comes through. It's just twelve o'clock."

I did as he said, gave Murphy my five bucks, and started through. "Weren't you just here yesterday?" he asked.

"This car attracts dirt."

As soon as the initial spray and soap hit my windshield I could see nothing. Then the hanging strips of cloth battered the car from above and the whirling brushes went to work on the sides. Finally, there were the drying blowers and then the cloth strips parted and I was back in the daylight. Simon Ark was standing there, his face drained of color. I drove up to him and lowered the window. "What is it, Simon? What happened?"

"She never came out."

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We persuaded Murphy to halt the line of vehicles and shut down the mechanism once the cars inside were clear of it. Then the three of us walked through the car wash together. There were lights near the floor, though I hadn't realized it while going through. "See, mister," the red-bearded man told us, "these walls are prefabricated sheet steel. There's this one side door that's kept locked. If she drove in the entrance, she had to drive out the exit."

"You saw her drive in," I said. "You took her five dollars."

"Kelly Block? Sure, I know her. She must have come out the other end and you missed her, that's all."

"I didn't miss her," Simon insisted, turning to me for support. "When I came around to this exit a green Buick with an older couple was just coming out. Then there was a white Ford with a male driver wearing a moustache and a baseball cap, and a red Toyota with a young girl at the wheel. You were the next car out," he said to me. "None of the cars was Kelly's, and none of them had her TREE-1 license plates."

We walked back through the car wash again, searching for clues, but there was nothing. Both car and driver had vanished without a trace. "Take a ride down to her office," Murphy suggested. "I'm sure she'll be back there by the end of her lunch hour. You guys just missed her somehow."

We walked back to our car. I tried to calm Simon's frustration by suggesting that Murphy might be somehow involved, but he brushed that aside. "There were other cars coming in. He had to take their money and send them through."

"I couldn't see a thing with all that soap and suds on my windshield. Someone in the car ahead of me could have gotten out and grabbed Kelly from her vehicle. She might have left the car wash on the floor or in the trunk of another car."

"Then what happened to her car?"

There was no immediate answer to that question. We went next door to the gas station and I broke the news to Gerry Webster. "We think something's happened to Kelly," I told him. Simon quickly outlined the details of her disappearance.

"That's impossible," Webster insisted. "People don't vanish while going through a car wash!"

"Her car is gone, too. There's no explanation for it."

"Did you check back at her office?"

"We're going there now," I told him.

He closed the station and came with us, but when we reached the tourist bureau it wasn't yet one o'clock and the girl behind the desk said simply that Kelly was out to lunch.

We waited past one.

We waited until two. The girl inside had no idea where she was.

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Webster insisted we check on her apartment so he guided us over there. It was a garden complex just outside of town. There was no sign of her car and she didn't answer the door. "Are you sure it was Kelly's car you followed this morning?" he asked.

"It was hers," I assured him. "We were in it with her just last night."

"Then I think we'd better phone the sheriff."

But the sheriff's office didn't want to hear about people missing only two or three hours, even if they had disappeared while going through a car wash. We were told to call them back if she didn't reappear in twenty-four hours.

"It's Murphy," I decided. "Whatever was done, Murphy must have had a hand in it." Although Simon Ark remained silent, Gerry Webster quickly agreed. After all, Murphy had admitted attending the Luskite services.

Back at the car wash, business had slacked off following the noonday rush. Murphy was reading a San Francisco newspaper in his tiny cubicle while waiting for customers. "We want to ask you some more questions about Kelly's disappearance," I said as he stood up to greet us.

"I told you everything I know."

"We'd like to examine that side door into the car wash."

"I told you, it's locked. Sometimes I come in that way in the mornings, but usually I use this front door." He took us around and showed us the locked door, but Webster wasn't convinced. "Thaddeus Lusk had you do something to her, didn't he?"

"Calm down, sonny. I didn't touch your girl, and nobody else did either. You folks are imagining this whole thing."

Another ten minutes of talking and speculating got us nowhere. When Kelly failed to reappear at her office or apartment the rest of the afternoon, we dropped Webster back at his station and drove out to Thaddeus Lusk's temple in the woods.

Somehow the place looked different by daylight. Though it was after six when we arrived, there was no service scheduled and only a half-dozen cars were in the parking area. The announcement of our arrival by the guard had brought Lusk's top deputy, Drew Hines, out to greet us.

"You're a night early," he said. "The special service isn't until tomorrow."

"We've come to see Mr. Lusk," Simon told him.

"You saw him last evening. He's doing his meditations now."

"Tell him it's about Kelly Block. I'm sure he'll see us."

"I can't—"

"If he doesn't see us tonight he'll be seeing the sheriff in the morning." Simon was not to be turned away.

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Finally Hines took off his glasses and polished them, considering the possibilities. If he feared Lusk's reaction for disturbing his meditations, he must have feared Simon Ark even more. Simon inspired that reaction in people who didn't know him well. "Stay right here," Hines told us. "I'll be back."

Presently we were ushered into the log temple itself, where rows of pews and a sort of altar gave it the appearance of an ordinary house of worship. Thaddeus Lusk was waiting there in the aisle, wearing his aqua robe. "Gentlemen, it is a pleasure to see you again."

"We've come about Kelly Block," Simon told him. "I'm sure you know she's disappeared."

"That's unfortunate, if true."

"It's true all right," I chimed in. "She vanished this noon from the car wash, along with her car."

"How extraordinary!"

Simon's eyes were blazing as he locked gazes with the man. "If this is another of your magic tricks, I suggest you produce her at once."

"I know nothing about it. My powers are such that they sometimes manifest themselves without any conscious direction from me." He frowned. "I thought someone said Kelly had been out here today, but she's certainly not here now. If you doubt me, you have permission to search the entire compound. Mr. Hines will accompany you."

"I think we'll do just that," Simon told him. He turned toward the door and I followed him out.

"How are we going to search for her?" I asked.

"If she's here, her car is probably here. That's harder for them to hide."

But the blue Ford was not among the six cars in the parking area. There was a Rolls Royce, obviously Lusk's, an MG, a Dodge Neon, a Chevy, a Saab, and a Ford van. One of the outbuildings was a garage and we had Hines unlock the door for us. There was no car inside, only some soiled dropcloths, cans of insect spray, a couple of empty paint cans, and a shotgun with a box of shells.

"What is the shotgun for?" Simon asked.

"This is the woods," Hines pointed out. "We have all sorts of creatures at night, including bears. Mr. Lusk won't have a weapon in the house, so we keep it out here."

"Aren't the guards armed?"

"Only with Mace and they've never had to use that. The people who come here are believers, Mr. Ark."

We left the garage and walked back to the stage, which was elevated about five feet above the ground. A latticework covering ran around it like a skirt. "Can we see under here?" Simon asked.

"What for?"

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"It's high enough to hide a car."

He sighed and opened one section so that we could walk beneath the stage in a crouching position. There was no hidden car, nothing except a ladder and a coil of thin plastic hose and the propane gas lines that produced the jets of fire for Lusk's act.

"I'm satisfied," I said, retreating quickly from the odor of a rotting animal.

Simon Ark followed after a moment, and once back in the fresh air stood staring up at the sky. In the daylight we could see the sun reflecting off the thin plastic wires of the bird screen, high above the stage. After dark it would be completely invisible.

"Notice how some of them are thicker," Simon told me. "Perforated plastic tubing for the rain trick."

"That doesn't tell us what happened to Kelly Block," I said.

"No," he agreed. "It doesn't."

Drew Hines saw us to our car and we drove off through the gate. It wasn't until we got back to the Hammonds' place that I noticed a little blue smudge on one of my hands. I showed it to Simon but it washed right off and I thought no more about it.

The following morning, the sheriff finally agreed to enter the investigation. He was a local lumberman named Jed Sweeney, a gray-haired man in his fifties.

He listened to our account of the disappearance and talked to Gerry Webster, but beyond that he wasn't too helpful. "Probably just decided to take off for a few days," he decided. "Folks do that sometimes, especially when they've got no family ties."

He went around to Kelly's apartment and had the landlord unlock the door, but nothing appeared out of place. Her clothes and toilet articles seemed to be where they belonged. Of course, if anything had been missing we'd have had no way of knowing. Simon watched the sheriff going through the motions and suggested he put out an alarm for the missing car. "I was just going to do that," he told us, going back out to the radio in his car.

"He doesn't seem to believe our story about the car wash," I said.

"That's understandable."

"Do you think she'll reappear, Simon?"

"If she does, it'll be at Thaddeus Lusk's special service this evening."

When we arrived, around seven-thirty, the parking area was already half full. One of the guards waved us into an empty space and we joined the others as darkness began to fall in among the redwoods. Promptly at eight o'clock, Thaddeus Lusk was introduced and walked onto the stage. He launched into a combination sermon and fund-raiser not too different from what we'd already heard. But there was one surprise.

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"I've summoned you here tonight to hear the joyous word directly from me. The Luskite Church is now a recognized institution! Starting in January, we have a contract to place our weekly service on cable television for all of America to see!"

The congregation burst out with applause and cheers. Simon and I moved closer through the crowd for a better look. "Now!" Lusk shouted. "Journey with me to this new tomorrow of our dreams! Journey with me as I douse the fires of Satan one more time!"

The fiery darts left his hands, the flames leapt from the stage as they had before. He stepped into their midst, raising his hands to the heavens and calling upon rain the color of their aqua robes. As it started to fall, I heard his scream, a split second before the entire stage and Thaddeus Lusk were enveloped in a tower of flame.

We surmised later that he must have smelled it, smelled the gasoline that flowed through those tubes and rained down upon his head. He screamed when he realized what was happening, but by then nothing could have saved him. When the fire trucks and ambulance arrived, quickly followed by Sheriff Sweeney, all they could do was pull the charred body from the ruins of the smoldering stage.

We quickly established it was Drew Hines who started the pump for the water that was to extinguish the fires on stage. The sight of Thaddeus Lusk's horrible death had left him shaken, still trembling a half-hour later. Sheriff Sweeney unscrewed the top of a water tank behind the garage and took a sniff. "Gasoline. It's a wonder the flames didn't shoot back along those tubes and cause an explosion."

"I shut it off at once," Hines said, "but not fast enough."

"What do you make of this?" the sheriff asked no one in particular.

"He was murdered," Simon Ark said, "in a particularly horrible manner. Someone who'd seen his act and knew how it worked slipped back here, emptied out the water, and filled this tank with gasoline."

Sheriff Sweeney kicked at the side of the tank. "What does it hold—twenty gallons?"

"About that. It worked perfectly on Tuesday night."

"The killer came after Tuesday, then. How would he get that much gasoline without attracting attention?"

"Perhaps he owned a gas station," Simon speculated.

"Webster at the Quik-Fill? What motive would he have?"

"If he thought Lusk had done something to Kelly Block—"

But Gerry Webster had heard of Lusk's death in the fire, and before we could decide to question him he pulled up in his truck. "It's all over town," he told us. "What happened?"

The sheriff quickly ran through the facts as we knew them. Webster frowned and asked, "Have they found Kelly?"

"Not yet."

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"Search for her! He must have her hidden here somewhere."

"We searched yesterday," I tried to tell him.

But the temple and garage and grounds were searched again. This time even Lusk's own house was searched. There was still no sign of Kelly Block. "Maybe Lusk had nothing to do with her disappearance," I suggested. "Maybe his killer has her, and killed Lusk because he knew about it."

"Perhaps." But Simon's eyes were on the line of cars now beginning to leave the parking area and head for the gate. Most had waited till now, perhaps thinking it was some sort of ultimate magic trick. But now the truth had sunk in, and women sobbed as their husbands led them to waiting cars or vans. There would be no more magic this night.

Suddenly Simon Ark grabbed the sheriff's arm. "Stop those cars from leaving! Close the gate!"

"What?"

"You heard me. The killer may still be in here."

"That gasoline could have been left hours ago, even yesterday," the sheriff argued. But he signaled his deputy to hold up the line.

Simon hurried along the rows of cars, searching for something. We tailed along and I was surprised to see him stop at a white Ford that was showing its age. "Get out," he told the driver, a young man with a moustache who was wearing a baseball cap.

"What's all this?" Sheriff Sweeney asked.

With a sudden motion Simon yanked off the baseball cap, revealing a coil of long brown hair underneath. "This is Lusk's killer," Simon told us. He peeled off the moustache, too, and we were staring into the angry face of the missing Kelly Block.

"With Lusk's background and preference for magic tricks," Simon told us later as we sat in Sheriff Sweeney's tiny office, "it seemed likely from the beginning that Kelly's disappearance was some sort of trickery dreamed up by him. She might even have suggested it herself. She would vanish at Murphy's car wash, and reappear tonight at this special service where Lusk would announce his television contract."

"How'd she do it?" the sheriff wanted to know.

"If you think about it, there's only one possible way. She couldn't pass through the cars in front of or behind her. She had to change the appearance of her car and herself. A dull blue paint job had to become white in an instant, and she had to change from a woman to a man. How was that possible? The car was simply coated with a water-soluble paint that would come off quickly under the whirling brushes of a car wash."

"Wait a minute," I objected. "The license plate number—"

"The real plate number was painted over in white, and the

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TREE-1 number painted on top of that. It all washed off, like the car's blue coloring, and we had a whole new car. It was still a Ford, but its color and the driver's sex—changed by a cap and moustache—were different. I let it go right by me."

"But we walked through that car wash twice. Why didn't we see the remains of the blue paint?"

"Because two or three cars, including ours, went through after she did. All that water, and what remained of the blue paint was flushed down the drain."

I simply shook my head in amazement. "How did you know?"

"Remember those empty paint cans in the garage at Lusk's compound? You got some of the blue paint on your hand but it washed right off later. That told me how it was done, and it told me Lusk had to have been part of it. He only pretended to be angry with her. I suppose the painting was done several days ago so people would get used to seeing her in that car. As long as she stayed out of the rain she was safe. But all this told us one thing with a certainty: Kelly Block had to have been in on the trick. Her driving the blue car, going through the car wash at noon, and disguising herself as a man were things only she could control. It was a safe enough trick. We've seen for ourselves how impossible it is to see the car ahead of or behind you as you go through. No one noticed the car's change in color. She couldn't have known I'd be at the other end watching for her, but she knew whatever we did the blue car would have vanished from sight. I assumed she would reappear at this evening's service. When she didn't, I realized she must have turned on him."

"But if she was willing to do this at Lusk's bidding, why did she want to kill him?" the sheriff asked.

"Because he persuaded her dying mother to cease all medication. Kelly watched her die, and it couldn't have been pleasant. I think she wanted Lusk to suffer, too, though his suffering lasted less than a minute. She went out to the temple yesterday with cans of gasoline, probably stolen from Gerry's station, and substituted it for the water in the tank. She knew the gas flames on stage would ignite the gasoline as soon as it started falling from those perforated plastic tubes. Lusk even let slip that he thought he saw her there yesterday."

"Why were you so sure she was in the crowd tonight? She'd already arranged the death trap."

"She'd watched her mother die," Simon Ark said. "She'd want to watch her mother's killer die, too."

When we flew back to New York two days later, Kelly was being held for psychiatric evaluation. We never did learn what happened to her. But then, as Simon remarked, we never learned what happened to Thaddeus Lusk either. ●

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1998 Readers Award

Barbara D'Amato

Kristine Kathryn Rusch

Joan Richter

1998's Readers Award poll brings a trio of new faces to the limelight. First-place author Kristine Kathryn Rusch, whose delicately unfolded story "Details" pulled the lion's share of votes, has penned only one mystery novel to date, the critically acclaimed *Hitler's Angel* (St. Martin's Press/1998). Not that Ms. Rusch is a novice writer; with more than twenty science fiction novels to her credit, and the Locus and John W. Campbell awards to crown her achievement in that field, she is already an honored veteran of her craft.

Ms. Rusch began to experiment with mystery fiction in 1997, after she resigned her post as the Hugo-award winning editor of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. *EQMM* readers immediately recognized her as a fresh talent in the mystery world, giving her debut story for the magazine, "Models" (11/97), fourth place in last year's competition. Then, with 1998's World War Two-era whodunit "Details" (12/98), came an overwhelming reader response. We congratulate Ms. Rusch on a story we believe will become a Readers Award classic: a tale that combines elements of the traditional mystery and suspense story with a telling and difficult theme. The Oregon-based author has more stories lined up for *EQMM* in 1999, and she continues to entertain her loyal readers in science fiction, too, with a new fantasy novel due soon from Bantam Books.

To write lightheartedly of murder requires an acuity only a few exceptional suspense-writers possess. "Of Course You Know That Chocolate Is a Vegetable" (11/98) announced with its very title that it was the product of such a nimble mind. Barbara D'Amato—Anthony and Agatha-award winner, recipient of the

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Carl Sandberg Award for Excellence in Fiction, and current president of the Mystery Writers of America—has made playfulness a trademark of her twenty-year career as a mystery author. Though her dozen-plus books, including the celebrated Cat Marsala series from Scribners, deal head-on with controversial social issues, there's never a heavy hand directing the action.

Ms. D'Amato appears to have been in a purely fun-loving mood when she created her second-place story "Of Course You Know That Chocolate Is a Vegetable" for *EQMM.* Incredibly, it was her first tale for this magazine; which only goes to show that our readers are willing to savor new dishes—even when they include vegetables!

A creative-writing student of *EQMM*'s legendary first editor Frederic Dannay, Joan Richter began contributing to our pages in 1962. If she has not become as familiar to subscribers as regulars like Edward D. Hoch and Donald Olson, it's largely because in the 1980s she accepted a job with American Express, as publicist for *Travel and Leisure* and *Food and Wine* magazines. The position stretched over ten years and left no time for crime writing. Her return to fiction in *EQMM* in 1995 was, therefore, experienced by many readers as a discovery of new talent.

With her deft plotting and probing characterizations, Ms. Richter ought, by rights, to claim many awards. Her third-place story for 1998, "Recipe Secrets" (Sept-Oct/ 98), has a wickedly surprising "twist-in-the-tail" ending, demonstrating only one of her diverse talents in the genre. More often, the former journalist writes an atmospheric tale set in exotic locale, sometimes drawing on her travels in Africa, where she and her husband and children spent two years in the Peace Corps. The author has more stories in the pipeline for *EQMM,* and she is currently at work on a novel. Fred Dannay would be proud!

Photo credits: Rusch by Beth Gwinn; D'Amato by Jerry Bauer

OTHER FINALISTS IN THE COMPETITION

Fourth . .(tied) "Crippen, Landru, and Carlos Palomino" by Doug Allyn
"The Safest Little Town in Texas" by Jeremiah Healy
Fifth . . . . "Poppy and the Poisoned Cake" by Steven Saylor
Sixth . . . "The Second Problem of the Covered Bridge" by Edward D. Hoch
Seventh . "Cedar Savage" by Doug Allyn
Eighth . . "The Halfway Woman" by Clark Howard
Ninth . . . "The Theft of Gloria's Greatcoat" by Edward D. Hoch
Tenth . . . (tied)"As Dark as Christmas Gets" by Lawrence Block
"Two Bits" by Jan Burke

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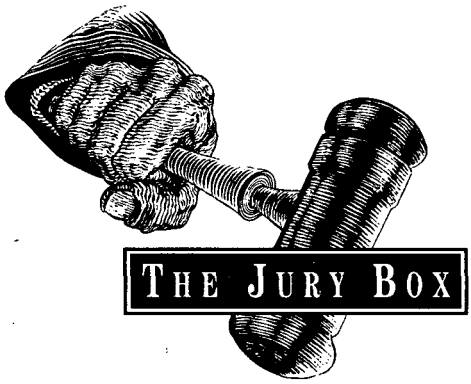

by Jon L. Breen

What detective story series has had the longest run under its original author? Some possible candidates spring to mind: Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes (40 years, 1887-1927), Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe (41 years, 1934-1975), Ellery Queen's (Frederic Dannay and Manfred B. Lee's) Ellery Queen (42 years, 1929-1971), Ngaio Marsh's Roderick Alleyn (48 years, 1934-1982), George Bagby's (Aaron Marc Stein's) Inspector Schmidt (48 years, 1935-1983). The champions to date, with 55-year life spans, are Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot (1920-1975) and Gladys Mitchell's Beatrice Lestrange Bradley (1929-1984).

Among current series, the nod must go to Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer, with at least a 49-year run from *I, the Jury* (1947) through his most recent appearance in *Black Alley* (1996). But Hammer's career has been interrupted by periods of inactivity as long as 19 years. The longest-lived continuous series still on the scene is Ed McBain's 87th Precinct, which began 43 years ago with the paperback original *Cop Hater* (1956) and greeted 1999 with its 49th entry.

**** Ed McBain: *The Big Bad City,* Simon & Schuster, $25. The main case, the investigation into the slaying of an unidentified young woman found strangled on a park bench, produces one well-calculated surprise after another—and if the dust jacket copy is as over-informative as the blurb on my advance proof, you may be tipped off to some of them prematurely. Secondary plot lines involve a considerate burglar known as the Cookie Boy, whose professional career takes an unexpectedly violent turn, and the thug who was acquitted of the murder of 87th cop Steve Carella's father and now is stalking Steve himself. This is McBain in top form. (Note on series time-warp: Carella is said to be approaching his fortieth birthday, which if you deny artistic license would

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mean he was born several years *after* the action of *Cop Hater.)*

*** Jennifer Rowe: *Suspect,* Ballantine, $5.99. Several mystery writers who began their careers with private or amateur sleuths have shifted to ostensibly more realistic police detectives. (For an interesting essay on the phenomenon from one such writer, see David Williams's "Gentleman vs. Player" in issue #34 of CADS, available for $9 from Geoff Bradley, 9 Vicarage Hill, South Benfleet, Essex SS7 1PA, England.) But Rowe's move from P.I. Verity Birdwood to Senior Detective Tessa Vance doesn't mean she is renouncing the allegiance to Golden-Age puzzle-spinning that gained her the label "the Australian Agatha Christie." The likeable Tessa's quirks and problems and her relationships with her fellow officers are in the gritty, realistic police-procedural tradition, but the serial-murder plot of this ingenious novel and its reader-teasing alternate solutions will recall the work of Christie, Queen, Van Dine, and Philip MacDonald more than any contemporary.

*** Marilyn Jacovsky: *Irregulars,* The Permanent Press, 4170 Noyac Road, Sag Harbor, NY 11963; $22. New Yorker Cloe Goldwin, like her creator a gay artist and psychotherapist specializing in sexual disorders, may have a murderer among her disturbed clients. This short first novel is most unusual: in outline, a standard serial-killer/woman-in-jeopardy tale complete with suspense and well-planned plot twists; in execution, a self-conscious literary work that suggests small presses and little magazines. The odd cross-pollination makes for a surprisingly rewarding reading experience. The professional insights include an entertaining riff on group therapy. A famous Algonquin Hotel cabaret performer appears under a thinly disguised alias for reasons that quickly become apparent. (The book could have used some editing: the Algonquin scene includes a reference to *David* Benchley, and the author is prone to dangling modifiers and faulty pronoun agreement.)

*** P.C. Doherty: *Ghostly Murders,* St. Martin's, $21.95. The historical mystery's most prolific practitioner (under a multitude of pseudonyms) is also one of the best. The fourth in his inventive sequence of darker stories told by Chaucer's pilgrims on their way to Canterbury is the Poor Priest's tale, concerning a haunted church, mysterious watchers, and a legendary treasure of the Templars. The author lays on the creepy atmosphere with fiendish relish. (Game for Doherty fans: have a pool to guess on which page the first line of murmured dialogue will appear.)

** Sinclair Browning: *The Last Song Dogs,* Bantam, $5.50. The Song Dogs are an Arizona high school cheerleading squad of 25 years ago whose members are being murdered one by one. Part Apache rancher and private eye Trade Ellis, a classmate,

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investigates. Browning offers an easy style, interesting background, and some well-drawn characters, but her first novel represents some unfortunate current mystery trends all too well: too much personal detail about the heroine too soon, too large a cast of her human and animal associates (presumably to reappear in future books), too much needless repetition of plot points, and Trade's determination to describe for the reader every move she makes in the course of her day, whether related to the case at hand or not. (Sue Grafton can do this entertainingly, but it's rarely a good idea for others.)

Stories about the Royal Canadian Mounted Police probably fall closer to the western than the detective genre. But many of the pulp writers represented in Don Hutchison's anthology *Scarlet Riders: Pulp Fiction Tales of the Mounties* (Mosaic Press, $18.95 Canadian, $12.95 U.S.) are familiar to mystery fans: Lester Dent, Ryerson Johnson, Frederick Nebel, and Talmage Powell, who leads off with "Deadly Trek to Albertville," a strong action story first published in 1957 and revised for this volume. Murray Leinster (Will F. Jenkins), best known for science fiction, shows in a harrowing outdoor survival tale, "The Driving Force" (1938), that he was one of the great popular writers whatever the genre. The editor's fascinating introduction combines magazine and Mountie history, and a selection of fifteen covers are reproduced in black and white. Pulp anthologies produce some interesting ironies: when Bernard Drew gathered pulp stories featuring women in *Hard-Boiled Dames* (1986), not a single represented author was a woman; and in Hutchison's collection, from a Canadian publisher supported in part by government grants, only one of the represented authors (Harold F. Cruickshank) was Canadian.

The latest anthology edited by the prolific Peter Haining is *The Mammoth Book of Movie Detectives & Screen Crimes* (Carroll & Graf, $10.95), a 464-page bargain that ostensibly gathers stories adapted for motion pictures or television. While some are direct adaptations (e.g., Ernest Hemingway's "The Killers," Cornell Woolrich's "It Had to Be Murder," the source for Hitchcock's *Rear Window),* others are casually related items (e.g., a short story by W.R. Burnett that he wrote in the same year as *Little Caesar* and a short-short by Eric Ambler actually written several years after *Epitaph for a Spy).* Among the off-trail items on offer are Thomas H. Hutchinson's script for "The Three Garridebs," a 1937 NBC production that was Sherlock Holmes's first television appearance, and Woody Allen's great private eye parody "Mr. Big," a welcome inclusion even if it wasn't really adapted into the film *Manhattan Murder Mystery.*

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THE VITAL CLUE

by Donald Olson

Donald Olson often creates characters who appear to be almost of a different era; he's in his element this month, having employed as his setting a decaying resort hotel whose elegance has given way to the ravages of time—and contemporary values. The story employs a classic, but never old, device — a writer motivated to pursue a mystery in order to find material for a story. We think Mr. Olson does it better than just about anyone! ¶

Besides myself, there are only six other guests remaining at the St. Elmo this late in the season. Next week the hotel will be closing for the winter. The lingering sea mists, the migrating birds, and the faint coloring of the leaves on the plane trees lining the esplanade foretell an early autumn. I've been here a week putting the final touches on my novel. My travel arrangements back to the city are already made.

At work in my room for the most part, it's been only in the last few days that I've become at all acquainted with my fellow guests. Roger and Peggy Andrews seem almost too young to be second-honeymooners. They keep very much to themselves. I've learned that Devillo Green is a genealogist from Boston with, if one can believe him, an international clientele. With his olive skin, gingersnap eyes usually hidden behind amber-tinted glasses, and graying curly hair, he is perhaps in his late forties but looks younger. Philip Reilly is what he looks like, a youngish teacher in a nearby prep school; he's never without a book in his hand, even in the dining room.

The other guest, a Miss Sinclair, is less easy to classify, thus leaving more ground for speculation. She dresses well, but simply, has soft brown hair, a purity of feature, and the quietly reflective gray eyes that suggest a private, unforthcoming personality. About this I was quite wrong.

This morning I was alone in the dining room having a late breakfast when Miss Sinclair came in. The waiter, already laying the

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tables for luncheon, gave her a cheery greeting as he took her order. He wore jeans and a fresh white T-shirt. The waiters are clearly all college students, soon to return to their respective schools. They seem oddly unsuited to the faded but still impressive grandeur of the St. Elmo. In its heyday it must have been one of the more exclusive hotels lining the esplanade in this no longer fashionable seaside resort.

My eyes followed the boy as he moved from table to table whistling softly under his breath. Unlike me, he was probably glad the summer was almost over and looking forward to athletic or academic triumphs. My fellow diner must have noticed my preoccupation for as she passed my table on her way out—she'd had only orange juice and a croissant—she smiled at me and without pausing murmured: "They didn't look like that twenty years ago."

As I strolled out onto the veranda a few minutes later I came upon her sitting in one of the wicker chairs facing out over the esplanade and the vaporous ocean below. I hesitated only briefly before taking the chair beside her. "But surely you weren't here twenty years ago," I said without preamble, as if resuming a conversation she herself had started.

She looked across at me with those pale gray eyes which were almost the color of the sea rippling gently upon the fawn-colored beach. "I was, yes. Twenty years ago this month, in fact. I was only eight."

I'd have guessed her to be somewhat older. "From what you said about the waiter, I assume it's changed since then."

"In many ways. Style and ambiance and all that. I prefer it as it is now. I have a weakness for romantic dilapidation."

"So do I," I confessed with a smile.

"Because you're a writer, perhaps? Mrs. DePane told me. She goes in for thumbnail sketches of her guests."

The DePanes own the hotel, although the day-to-day management seems to be left in her hands. Her husband spends most of his time on his boat; he is never glimpsed around the hotel without a can of beer in his hand and an air of mild intoxication. They look enough alike to be brother and sister, both close to fifty, jovial and pot-bellied. He is nearly bald and when he smiles displays teeth so shamly white they might have been ordered from a catalogue of cut-rate dentures.

"The waiters then were not schoolboys," said Miss Sinclair. "They were somewhat older, as I recall, very handsome and dapper in their white shirts and black ties. They affected a continental air and exuded a kind of discreet sexiness." I detected a tone of cynical archness. "Even as a child I think I was aware of that. Of some things that summer I have almost total recall."

"And now you've come back," I said, already—and perhaps

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falsely—scenting a whiff of mystery. "Let me guess why. A sentimental pilgrimage?"

She uttered an unladylike laugh, almost a snort. "Hardly that. Call it the end of a quest."

"A quest for what?"

"For a ghost, you might say." She turned to look up at the building. "This place has ghosts, you know. At least for me."

As she got up to leave I waited until she'd turned away before speaking. "Miss Sinclair?"

She looked back. Somehow I felt sure she might refuse, but I had to ask. I found her an intriguing young woman. "Will you have dinner with me tonight? I meant . . . as we're both on our own."

"Why not?" she replied with a throwaway smile. "But call me Nita. It's actually Bonita. Bonnie when I was a kid. It never seemed to fit. I was never a bonny sort of lass. I liked Nita better."

I said I was stuck with my common-sounding name. "I often wish I had a name with more—flair. Like our fellow guest's, Devillo Green."

A faint lift of the brows and again that cynical archness.

"Know anything about him?"

"Only that he's a professional genealogist."

"I was surprised to find him here," she said. "Not that I'd met him before, but I'd heard about him. From a lady I worked for, Ethel Darling. A friend of hers in Boston had employed him to trace her ancestors. She wanted to get into the D.A.R. But she was rather indiscreet. Mr. Green apparently has a way of ingratiating himself with lonely rich widows. He found out things about her. Things she would rather have kept in the dark. She ended up paying him for much more than her family tree."

"Good lord, you mean he blackmailed her?"

She laughed away my astonishment. "Secondhand scandal, I'm sure. Some of my ladies loved telling stories."

She explained that she had left nursing to work as a nurse-companion to a series of well-to-do elderly women but had sufficient private means and was free to work only when she felt like it.

Somehow this didn't altogether satisfy my instinct that there was more to Nita Sinclair than her words implied. I was right, as it turned out, but I had to wait until the dinner hour to learn more.

"Oh, *I* could tell you a story." How often I've heard this. Of course everyone does have a story to tell, but perhaps only to writers do people feel so little constraint in opening their souls. I'm quite sure Nita Sinclair did not make a habit of talking about herself but the circumstances were favorable: two strangers sharing a dinner table at a summer hotel with small likelihood of ever meeting again.

"I think my life would have been quite different had we never

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spent that month here twenty years ago," she said with a reminiscent gaze around the room. Devillo Green was sharing a table with the second-honeymooners. Reilly had a book propped in front of him. Another couple, evidently there just for a meal, occupied a table in the far corner. Like the St. Elmo's other public rooms, the dining room was spacious and high-ceilinged; conversations were in no danger of being overheard.

"You said you were eight at the time. You were here with your parents?"

"With my mother, and a nanny, Miss Dibley, of whom I was very fond. Mother had recently divorced her second husband, my stepfather, Walter Montcalm. Financially very much to her advantage. It gave her scope, the sort of life she'd always wanted to live. There was nothing socially backward about Mother, but she lacked—discrimination. About men. She was pretty and rich and loved being fussed over, by hotel managers, maître d's, and waiters. She was attracted to young men."

I think I knew the answer but I asked anyway. "Is she still living?"

"No. You might say she died from complications of amorality, which I think means being without a sense of moral responsibility. That's the nicest way I can put it."

At this point Mrs. DePane entered the room. She wore, as usual, a dressy smock over black stretch pants. Despite her plumpness, she was an attractive woman and must once have been a beauty. She circled the tables, stopping at each to murmur a word or two. Coming to us, she asked, "Everything to your liking, my dears?"

She said this with a conspiratorial twinkle in her dark eyes. Does she think we're working up to an affair?

At Devillo Green's table she laid a hand lightly on his shoulder but with a gesture I'm sure she thought unobserved. One finger briefly stroked the nape of his neck. She then sat down at a table near the door and spoke a word to the young waiter.

"My mother—she preferred that I call her Vivian—took a shine to one of the waiters," Nita Sinclair continued. "His name was Claudio. He was dark and handsome and had sleek dark hair. I remember his eyes, how they gleamed under long black lashes. Dances were held in the music room back then and the waiters were allowed to mingle with the guests. I suppose it was one of their duties. My mother always danced with Claudio. They made a pretty picture, Mother very blond and Claudio so very dark. I never realized anything extraordinary was happening until much later. But I remember—I think I remember—a peculiar excitement in my mother's voice when on certain occasions she would be unusually affectionate and say, 'You may sleep in Miss Dibley's room tonight, darling.' I never objected. Sara Dibley was a marvelous storyteller."

Beyond Nita Sinclair's shoulder I was aware of Devillo Green

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chattering to the second-honeymooners and noticed how often he would turn his head slightly and steal a glance at Mrs. DePane. This, together with that caress of the neck, set me to wondering.

"A couple of weeks after we arrived here," Nita Sinclair went on, "I awoke in Miss Dibley's room with an awareness of an electricity in the atmosphere. Something was amiss but I had no idea what. Of course, the truth could not be kept from me very long. Mother was gone. You can guess what happened, I suppose."

"Your mother had, as the British say, done a bunk? With the handsome Claudio?"

"Precisely. I can't recall that I was at all devastated. I had an independent spirit even then and I suppose I was a precocious child. Mother was gone but Sara Dibley was there. I suppose I even enjoyed all the sympathetic attention. Being treated as if Mother had suddenly died."

She paused to pick unhungrily at her Caesar salad. "Later—much later, after I'd gone to live with my uncle—it transpired that Sara Dibley knew precisely what had been going on. We saw each other occasionally as I was growing up. More than a year passed before I heard from Mother. She wrote from Rome, of all places, making it sound as if she were simply on an extended holiday and would soon be sending for me. She was still with Claudio and implied that he would soon be my new daddy."

I asked if she'd been happy living with her uncle.

"Happy enough. I didn't see much of him. He was always crisscrossing the country on business. As I grew older I thought a lot about Mother. My resentment faded. I loved her, you see, and felt a womanly compassion for her. Does that make sense?"

"Of course. Head and heart make different judgments."

"I kept waiting for that summons to Rome. It never came. Eight years passed before I heard from her again. I still have that letter. I can almost quote it from memory. A terrible letter. One could read calamity in every line. Poor Mother must have been in a state of abject misery when she wrote it. Claudio had duped her and dumped her. Had somehow, and not by marrying her, swindled her out of all she possessed, money and jewelry. She had some very good jewelry. The police had offered little sympathy and less help. She poured out apologies for the way she had abandoned me. She prayed I would forgive her. The letter was written on the stationery of a hotel in Palermo."

Nita Sinclair's expression remained serene as she recounted all this; as if time had washed away all the pain she'd felt at the time. "My uncle wasted no sympathy on Mother. He said, 'She made her bed, let her die in it.'"

Prophetic words, as it turned out. Not more than a fortnight later word was received from the American consulate that

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Vivian Montcalm had taken her own life in Palermo.

After dark I took a long walk, back and forth along the esplanade. It was a moonless, misty night. Ghost-ridden. I knew I would find it hard to get to sleep, and I'm somewhat ashamed to confess that at least subconsciously my imagination was even then at work transforming elements of Nita Sinclair's true-life tragedy into that other reality which is the storyteller's business.

Dimly through the mist I picked out the lights on DePane's boat. He had a passion for night fishing. I could picture him out there swilling his beer and patiently waiting for a catch. And meanwhile, I wondered, what sport was his wife enjoying? I remembered those telltale signs of intrigue between her and the sexy-eyed genealogist.

On the esplanade next morning I again encountered Nita Sinclair. She wore a tweed skirt and around her shoulders a white angora sweater to protect against the morning chill. She greeted me with a little wave of the hand.

"You're out early," she said as I seated myself on the bench beside her.

"I didn't sleep well. I kept thinking about what you'd told me."

With a seeming clairvoyance that pricked my conscience she said, "Maybe you could write a story about it all."

"I should have to invent an ending," I said lightly, "unless you told me the rest of the story."

"Not much there to interest a reader—if you ever did make a story of it. One day—I'm not sure when—I took it into my mind to track down the treacherous Claudio who was responsible for my mother's death as surely as if he'd murdered her. A foolish quest, doomed to failure, but I suppose it gave me a sense of purpose which my life lacked at the time."

"You actually went looking for him?"

"Halfway around the world. I had the means and I liked to travel between jobs. In Palermo I visited the hotel where Mother died; I even saw the police report. I collected names, but none of them was Claudio's. In Rome I was a bit luckier. I located the villa Mother had leased for three years. Its owner remembered her well. As well as the *'signora's* young friend.' He described him perfectly, but the name, he was sure, was not Claudio. Perhaps Claudio hadn't been his real name, or maybe he'd changed it to something else that sounded less like a waiter—or a gigolo. What clues I did garner led me no closer to him. I never did discover the vital clue. Once he'd latched onto Mother's modest fortune he'd probably taken care to cover his tracks."

It seemed, listening to her, a wasteful exercise, that futile pursuit of the rapacious waiter.

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"Suppose you'd found him," I asked. "What would you have done?"

She stared out at the sunless, barren ocean and shrugged. "Had the pleasure of confronting him, at least. No, that's not true. I wanted retribution, in one form or another. It amuses me now, some of the crazy ideas I dreamed up. Posing, for instance, as a rich, naive American and luring him into trying the same thing on me as he'd tried on Mother. And then turning the tables on him some way or other. But it was hopeless. That vital clue eluded me. Not a very satisfactory ending for a story, is it?"

"Real-life stories seldom have satisfactory endings."

"If you ever write this one I'm sure you'll do better."

By now I'm sure something is going on between Mrs. DePane and Devillo Green. Yesterday, taking a walk in the hills above the hotel, I looked down and spotted his convertible parked on the headland and the two of them sitting on a blanket beside the car, sharing a picnic in the grass. I retreated hastily. Later, over lunch, I reported to Nita Sinclair what I'd seen.

She replied with a smile that she had suspected something of the sort. "She strikes me as being a very passionate woman. How much do you want to bet it's not the first little summer intrigue she's enjoyed."

"One doubts he's working on her family tree."

Three days before the hotel would shut for the winter and we few remaining guests would have dispersed, Mrs. DePane entertained us all at what she called "a little farewell luncheon." Apparently it was an end-of-the-season tradition. Even her husband joined the party, looking as uncomfortable as a schoolboy dressed for a funeral. I don't recall his contributing more than a few words to the conversation but he smiled a great deal with his falsely bright teeth.

His wife, on the other hand, was in a festive mood. She wore a dress of some shiny red material and around her neck a pendant, a miniature gold-framed portrait on ivory of a lady who looked like Marie Antoinette. "I may not see you all until shortly before you leave," she announced. "I always take a little overnight shopping trip to the city before we close up and leave for the South."

Out of the corner of my eye I detected an impish smile on Devillo Green's face. Would he, too, I wondered, be taking a "little overnight trip to the city"? I glanced at Nita Sinclair but she did not respond. Her face wore an absent, faraway look as if she too were looking into the future. Or into the past.

Friday's events remain vividly fixed in my memory. Shortly after dawn a deliveryman discovered Mr. DePane's body on the stone-flagged terrace behind the hotel. He'd died, it transpired, of

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a broken neck, apparently having fallen, as the police concluded, from the balcony of the DePanes' top-floor suite. His blood contained a high level of alcohol.

A tragic end to what, for me at least, had been a pleasant interlude. The police were still on the premises when Mrs. DePane arrived back from the city. I wasn't aware whether or not Devillo Green had been away from the hotel overnight. We all rallied round our stricken hostess with outpourings of sympathy.

"Poor woman," said Nita Sinclair when we met for lunch later that day. "What a way to end the season." The schoolteacher and the second-honeymooners had already departed and I had finished my packing. Rather hoping that Nita Sinclair and I might meet again, I asked for her address. She replied that her plans were uncertain. "Leave me yours," she said. "I'll get in touch."

I'm certain now that she never will.

On the following morning I was the last to leave. As I was saying my goodbyes to Mrs. DePane she seemed inclined to talk about her husband.

"If only you all had known him when he was young," she said tearfully. "Such a handsome man. So charming. So debonair. Let me show you."

From beneath the collar of her blouse she drew out that same pendant she'd worn at the farewell party. It was actually a locket. She opened it to reveal a tiny photograph. He had indeed been a striking young man.

"He was a waiter, you know," she said. "Many years ago, in this very hotel. He spoke of it when we met in London. He was very happy and carefree here. He'd come into some money since those days and his great ambition was to own the St. Elmo. We made inquiries. The owners were more than happy to sell. This part of the coast was no longer fashionable."

Could what I was thinking possibly be true?

"Tell me," I said, "did you happen to show this to Miss Sinclair? Your husband's picture?"

She seemed not to find the question peculiar. "Oh yes. She mentioned my locket after our luncheon party. Said it was identical to one her mother had owned. She asked if she could buy it, but of course I would never part with it."

I tried to dismiss the notion as pure fantasy. A wild coincidence. And I thought then I would never write about it. Readers distrust the element of coincidence in a story. But later I began to wonder. *Was* it coincidence? Had Nita Sinclair actually returned to the St. Elmo to acknowledge finally the failure of her quest? Or was it to celebrate its success? Had she already discovered that Mr. DePane and the waiter Claudio were one and the same? Had the locket provided that final, vital clue?

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What was it she'd said? "I wanted retribution, in one form or another."

And I remembered an offhand remark she'd made during one of our talks. That her mother had killed herself by jumping from the window of that hotel in Palermo. ●

SNOW MAN

by Katherine H. Brooks

Natalie watched as the snow in the driveway
Threatened to rise to a foot before dark.
The children were planning to visit their parents,
And where in this storm would they manage to park?
"It's time," she told Frank, "to grab hold of a shovel
And work on the driveway. It's covered with snow."
But Frank, with his usual shameful reaction,
Insisted on taking a nap, and growled, "NO!"
Poor Natalie mused, "Since it has to be shoveled,
The one who's elected is probably me,"
And wearily reaching the end of her patience,
She emptied the sleeping pills into his tea.

When Frank was sufficiently deadened to feeling
She dragged him impulsively out to the yard,
Then rolled him in circles around on the driveway
In haste, fearing shortly the snow would be hard.
He coated up nicely, and cleared off the surface
As neatly as ever you please—snow and all—
And what had been Frank became bigger and bigger,
While over the driveway he rolled in a ball.
Inspired by her efforts, she fashioned a snowman,
With Frank as the base. It had icicle teeth,
A round little face, with a hat and a carrot,
Two coals and a jacket, and Frank underneath.

Then Natalie smilingly welcomed her daughters,
And said when they noted the parking was "swell,"
"You've really your father to thank for the driveway.
He helped me a lot with the snowman, as well."
Then later that day they reported him missing,
And all of them wailed when he couldn't be found,
But Frank never showed till the snow started melting.
The mailman discovered him curled to the ground.
Beside him were lying two coals and a carrot,
A hat and a jacket—it wasn't the norm—
But Natalie swore that her husband, demented,
Had stumbled outside and was caught in the storm.

Poem ©1999 by Katherine H. Brooks

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Art by Jason Eckhardt

A Quilt of Crazies

by James Powell

The tour of Casa Loma, Toronto's famous ninety-eight-room, mock-medieval castle, ended in the baronial, oak-paneled Great Hall. Standing beneath the sixty-foot-high ceiling hung with banners of another age, the guide thanked everyone for their attention and invited them to visit the castle's grounds and souvenir shop.

RCMP Corporal Dean Lamport, a squat, sallow-faced man in wide tie and rumpled raincoat, held back as the tourists headed for outdoors. Earlier he had sensed he was being followed and knew he must not lead anyone to the rendezvous that was the real purpose for his taking the tour.

Years ago, when Canada's underworld gangs moved to thwart RCMP infiltration by excluding anyone who met Mountie height or steely-gaze requirements, the Force countered by recruiting a special cadre of dumpy, weak-chinned cadets, trained in off-color language, slouching, and shiftiness of eye who graduated knowing they could only wear the scarlet tunic in the privacy of their own rooms. Because they tended to be short and stout, the Force chris-

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tened these unsung heroes "teapot" Mounties.

Yes, Lamport meant to be the last one outside. But then the man in the clerical collar held the door and smiled him through. Stepping out into the fresh air, the teapot Mountie remarked to himself that the reverend's aftershave smelled like spray paint.

Sergeant Bullock returns this month in one of his wackiest adventures ever. As fantastical as some of James Powell's stories are, they often arise from a little kernel of fact. In this case, Bullock's bear, the one-legged Winnie-the-Peg, bears a resemblance to the historical "Winnipeg," mascot to one of Canada's most distinguished military units. Legend has it that Winnipeg was used by A. A. Milne as the model for Winnie-the-Pooh. ¶

Heather Stairwell, a sweet-faced, blue-haired woman wearing thick, buckle-on goggles and fashionable tweeds, stood at an embrasure high on the Casa Loma battlements. Below her, tourists crowded the stone terrace and spilled down onto the broad lawn. Her goggle lenses were specially designed to pick up the invisible ultraviolet paint Father Genesius Polite of the Friends of Obscurity had sprayed on the target. Out on the lawn she found it, the raincoat painted with the carmine, slightly parted lips, the paint still dripping as if from a large wet kiss. The Mark of SWAK.

Pulling on latex gloves, she unslung a long narrow leather case and assembled the three fiberglass sections of a modern longbow. Placing one end of the bow between the sole and upper of her sensible shoe, she grabbed the other in both hands and, using all her weight, bent the fiberglass into an arc and strung the bow.

Back at the embrasure she spotted her target again. He had moved off from the tourists and seemed to be trying to coax someone out from behind a large maple. Now a taller man wearing one of those stupid black plush fedoras decorated with a polka-dotted guinea-fowl feather emerged warily from behind the tree. She recognized RCMP Inspector Marcel Nickerson. Some day, she suspected, if Nickerson kept getting in the way, she would be ordered to kill him, too. But not today.

Notching the arrow in the bowstring, she pulled back until the feathers touched her cheek and let fly. The arrow shot through the air and found its mark between the painted lips. Lamport genuflected as if proposing marriage to the Angel of Death. Then he pitched forward onto the grass.

Heather Stairwell watched Nickerson dash over and kneel beside the body. Then he turned a pale, fearful face toward the

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crenelated walls. Now he was up and prancing back and forth to make himself a moving target. In a moment, she knew, he would break and run. As she raised the bow again Nickerson made an undignified dash for cover. Her second arrow pinned the fedora to the tree trunk as he disappeared behind it. "Get a life, Marcel," she muttered. "Get a hat."

Grim-faced and breathing heavily, Nickerson crouched behind the tree and rubbed his bare head sadly. Damn, he'd loved that fedora. Of course, Nickerson knew who had killed Lamport. The smell of face powder on the arrow's feathers pointed to the SWAK Team, the lunatic element of the Hearts and Flowers Society, a Canadian ladies club which held garden parties to finance compassionate causes. Nickerson cell-phoned for the coroner's vehicle and stayed crouched there until it arrived.

"So much for Toronto as a world-class city," scoffed Acting Sergeant Maynard Bullock on learning no hotel in town would rent a room to a man and a black bear. Not even if the man was a Mountie and the bear Winnie-the-Peg, the Force's one-legged mascot. So they'd had to stay at Buffalo Head House, a B-and-B on Pembroke Street catering to the Mountie trade.

Bullock and friend were in Toronto on a public-relations assignment for the Fur Umbrella, the Canadian fur industry trade group. Tomorrow they would appear in an elaborate fashion show beamed live around the world from Putting on the Dog, Toronto's fanciest Bloor Street furrier.

Rumor had it this was the government's farewell kiss to the Fur Umbrella, which may have been implicated in last year's murder of Dr. Fraser Douglas and the theft from his laboratory of his secret formula for converting forest waste by-products into synthetic furs virtually identical to the real thing.

That evening Bullock left Winnie snoring on the rug in their room and went down to the Buffalo Head House's crowded parlor. He sat on a Second Riel Rebellion-style love seat, notebook on his knee, a pencil stub in one hand and the other shading his eye from the scarlet glare. (He suspected the Toronto boys, a real bunch of show-off fancy Dans, were using something to punch up the color in their tunics.)

Bullock was working on a new invention. Yesterday, during a rehearsal break, he'd popped out for some fresh air in the alley behind Putting on the Dog, where the water company jackhammers were tearing up the street. As he watched, it came to him. How about a Velcro-asphalt blend so a ripped-up street could be smoothed back in place as good as new?

Now his imagination once again rushed beyond mere practical

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details to the accomplished fact. His mind's ear heard the Governor General's dedicatory voice. "Ladies and Gentlemen, we are not gathered here to unveil still another statue honoring Commissioner Maynard Bullock the defender of justice or the great humanitarian. Those statues you will find elsewhere. Today we celebrate Bullock the inventor of hundreds of cunning devices to improve our daily lives." The voice chuckled. "Mention them all and we'd be here well into next week." (Much laughter from the crowd.) "Let me just single out Mendable Macadam, as the inventor so cleverly called it. Bullock . . ."

Now another voice spoke his name and dragged Bullock back to dull reality. Inspector Marcel Nickerson was standing by the love seat dressed in civvies. Bullock had admired Nickerson from the man's days on the Bunco Canada desk in Ottawa where, awash in swindle and fraud, he kept a cheery attitude, insisting that "the con artist's ingenuity and the victim's gullibility are only the underside of the inventiveness and innocence that makes Canada great."

But this Nickerson had hunted eyes and a furtive look. "They told me I'd find you here, Bullock. Scoot over and I'll join you. I like to sit shy of windows."

Bullock quickly complied, adding, "By the way, sir, congratulations on your promotion to the Lunatic Fringe desk."

Nickerson sat down. "It does change one's attitude," he admitted.

Suddenly Nickerson jumped up and flattened himself against the wall. As he peered out through the lace window curtains he added gravely, "On the Lunatic Fringe desk I quickly came to this very sobering conclusion: Every cause worthy enough to unite sane people for a lofty goal will also attract a mad element ready to achieve that same goal by violent means."

"Surely not every cause, sir. Not the Salvation Army. Not the Boy Scouts."

As he sat back down, Nickerson gave Bullock a long, pitying look before continuing, "Oh, at first things were pretty cut-and-dried. Terrorists are a single-minded breed. 'Tell me who got blown up,' I'd say, 'and I'll tell you who lit the fuse.' If a biological-weapons facility is bombed you know you're dealing with Docs Against Pox, the violent arm of the Union of Concerned Epidemiologists. That's the way it used to be.

"But not anymore. Get this: A year ago armed men simultaneously attacked the vast chicken farms north of Toronto, liberating hundreds of thousands of leghorns to terrorize the Ontario countryside. It looked like the work of the Free Rangers, the violent wing of the Fair Play for Poultry Committee. Or maybe the Cucumber Bund, the radical element of the Canadian Guild for

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the Promotion of Vegetarian Thought. But the culprit turned out to be the Foes of Fur, the crazy arm of the nonviolent Friends of Faux Fur."

Nickerson leaned forward, looked left and right, and dropped his voice. "My greatest fear has come to pass, Bullock. A charismatic leader, they call him Mr. Big, has stitched together every oddball group into a crazy-quilt of lunatic fringes. He has raised a hellish patchwork banner beneath which the mad, violent, and self-righteous now march in lockstep. To discover where Mr. Big would strike next, I ordered Corporal Lamport down into The Pit."

Bullock swallowed hard. The Pit was Toronto's dark underbelly, a vast casbah of dripping tunnels and vaulted, torchlit chambers far beneath the fabled subway system. Here the criminal element camped out in the forgotten freight yards of the underground railroad or lived on luxury houseboats floating in the secret submarine pens, souvenirs of Canada's missed window of opportunity when, during the Coolidge administration, it almost launched a sneak attack to destroy the U. S. Great Lakes fleet, leaving their southern neighbor wide open to invasion.

"In The Pit," Nickerson continued, "Lamport learned Mr. Big plans something dramatic during your fashion show tomorrow. We don't know what. But we think we know the group he'll use to pull it off. My people can handle that end of it."

The inspector paused as if the words he was about to say were bitter to him. "Anyway, I sent Lamport back down into The Pit to follow up on a lead to Mr. Big's identity. Today he was murdered before my very eyes." Nickerson started to doff a hat that wasn't there and his sadness deepened. "But with his dying breath Lamport told me Mr. Big is missing a finger up to the knuckle on his right hand. That's where you come in. I need someone inside Putting on the Dog to spot Mr. Big for us. Oh, he'll be there, all right. That's part of his power over his people: He never let's them take a risk he wouldn't himself. Spot him. Then get word to me. I'll take it from there."

"Glad to be of help, sir," said Bullock, adding an earnest, "Look, Inspector, I've pushed the public relations envelope as far as it can go. Any chance of a transfer to your unit? I want to match wits with the crazies."

Nickerson stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I *am* short a man. Of course I'll have to check with your boss. Is it still LaPierre?"

Afterwards Bullock walked the inspector back to his hotel ("Just to be on the safe side," Nickerson had suggested) and the conversation turned, as most Mountie conversations did these days, to night-fat. The Force was rife with stories of sudden overnight weight gain of ten or twenty pounds.

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For his part, Nickerson blamed Assistant Commissioner Syngh, he who wore a Sikh turban where his Stetson should be and a curved dagger in his belt. A fit-and-trim fanatic, Syngh was a familiar sight pushing his rubber-tired weighing machine through headquarters on surprise inspection rounds.

Personally Bullock thought night-fat mere superstition. For him the culprit was "Stealtho," a new chemical additive to Mountie breeks to eliminate corduroy squeak and facilitate sneaking up on criminals. He suspected it also caused breek shrinkage during dry cleaning.

But times sure were changing on the Force, what with assistant commissioners in turbans and Commissioner MacNaughton himself, who, since the Force awarded the Disney Corporation RCMP marketing rights, always had a couple of ponytailed movie types in sunglasses in his entourage.

Though anxious to start his assignment, Bullock set out for the furriers the next morning on foot. Yesterday, on the subway, Winnie in the muzzle and leash required by law, some guy had called out, "Hey, why's the gorilla on a leash?" Bullock explained that Winnie was a bear, not a gorilla. "I was talking to the bear," said the guy. Much subway laughter. Bullock hated Toronto. So they walked.

Lying in bed last night, Bullock had drawn up a list of fashion-show people whose right hand, for one reason or another, he'd never seen. He was surprised there were so many. Then he'd cudgeled his brain for a good hour until it suddenly came to him, an easy-as-pie way to get Mr. Big to show his hand.

Now as Bullock walked, fine-tuning his plan, a Mercedes-Benz convertible pulled alongside him. The tall, hollow-cheeked man in tweed cap and driving gloves at the wheel introduced himself in a loud, parade-ground voice. "John Cassius Sprat. Bullock, right? Hop in. I go right by Putting on the Dog. So let's chew the fat." Sprat winked and then boomed with laughter.

Of course Bullock knew Sprat. As he'd told Nickerson last night, Sprat was all the fashion models talked about. His Montreal modeling agency, the House of Sprat, was now actively recruiting in Toronto. Sprat's commissions were exorbitant. But he offered night-fat insurance.

In spite of exotic names like Tabou, Kamchatka, Simoom, and Tsen-Tsen, Bullock found the models a sensible bunch. Yet they all feared night-fat attacks. Montreal's fashion models reportedly saw a lot of it before Sprat signed them up.

Bullock put Winnie in the backseat and got in beside the driver, noting a slender fashion doll with strawberry-blond hair lying on

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the dashboard. It had thick coins of gray modeling clay pressed to its toy hips.

As they drove off Sprat said, "A little birdie told me you're interested in our night-fat insurance program." Bullock recalled patting his stomach and joking with the models that maybe he could use some insurance, too. But he still thought Stealtho was the culprit.

"Now you and I are reasonable men, Acting Sergeant. We know no insurance policy can stop weight gain. Absurd, right? On the other hand, I can put an easy twenty pounds on anybody who doesn't buy one. Overnight. I kid you not."

Bullock cocked a sceptical eyebrow.

"You're asking how I do it, right?" said Sprat. "Well, I'll skip all the scientific jargon. Let's just say that today's emphasis on slimming down has created this great churning and rumbling cellulite storm cloud. When the cloud becomes overcharged with avoirdupois it gives it off as greased lightning. Beanpoles like me act like lightning rods. We can feel the fat course down through our bodies and out the soles of our feet. How, I asked myself, could I control this force, direct it, and put it to my profit? I experimented with lead shoes and, by golly, they worked. At short range."

Sprat made a pistol of his fingers and fired off four quick shots at pedestrians on the sidewalk. "Boy, are they in for a hefty surprise when they wake up tomorrow.

"What I needed was a way to do it long distance. In darkest Haiti wise doctors taught me what I needed to know." Sprat gave Bullock the elbow. "I kid you not. If I tap my lead heels three times the whole population of Kansas will wake up twenty pounds heavier."

"What's all this got to do with me?"

"It's the chance of your lifetime, that's what. The House of Sprat has an eye to expanding the night-fat insurance side of our business. You could be our exclusive representative to the Mountie trade. We have proven recruiting techniques, demonstrations that'll have them lining up to sign on. What do you say?" He worked the elbow again. "You look like the kind of guy who enjoys power and making the other guy sweat."

Bullock had kept his eyebrow cocked so long it was giving him a headache. "Mounties don't moonlight," he said, remembering the cautionary tale of Constable Lloyd Dix, who'd answered an ad in the back of a pulp magazine about selling Christmas cards in your spare time. When the brass finally hauled him up on the carpet for running a business out of the trunk of his car, Dix was wearing a Rolex watch, silk underwear, and boots of Corinthian leather. Made to choose between the Force or his greeting-card business,

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he surprised everyone, including his twin brother Constable Floyd Dix, by resigning from the Force. The poor sap.

"So quit," urged Sprat. "Buy in with us. Two hundred thousand'll get you a healthy slug of our Mountie operation."

Bullock had to laugh out loud. Where would a Mountie come up with that kind of money?

They reached Putting on the Dog. Getting out of the car, Bullock noticed Sprat's gloved right hand on the steering wheel. The little finger stuck out as if he held a tea cup. Was it affectation or was the finger stuffed? Time to give his clever plan a test run. "Night-fat insurance should make you a fortune," he said. "And speaking of fortunes, reading palms is a hobby of mine. Show me your right hand. That's where all the juicy stuff is."

Sprat moved his car back into traffic. "Another time, okay? I'll be around. Think about my offer."

Bullock frowned at the departing car. Could Sprat be Mr. Big, the way tall guys got called Shorty?

Dressers, makeup people, and members of the Precambrian Brass Quintet crowded the store vestibule, waiting to file past the Fur Umbrella's grim-faced, well-armed security people. Bullock stuck close to Winnie. When their turn came the guards waved them both through, wanting no repeat of the commotion the bear had made the first time they tried to frisk him.

It was 10:30 by the time Bullock and Winnie entered the plush interior. They immediately fell in step with Mr. Waley, the store's owner—at least as well as a peg-legged bear and a big-footed Mountie could fall in step with a limping furrier. Recently an anti-leghold-trap intruder had planted a small steel trap in Waley's bedroom slipper. Waley also carried his right arm in a paisley sling. He had been wounded in a drive-by shooting, the Friends of Obscurity's way of announcing he'd won their Running Dog of the Canadian Glitterati award. The F. of O. was the violent pew of the Church of SS Alphonse and Gaston, a New Age religion which held it sinful to hog more than your allotted fifteen minutes of fame.

They marched further into the store, out from under the mezzanine balcony and into a grove of loud yellow-and-red-checked pant legs. The Four Flaming Fandango Brothers, juggling clowns who worked on tall stilts and unicycles, were taking a break sitting atop the mezzanine railing, reading newspapers and chatting. Personally, Bullock found the brothers very standoffish, even for people on stilts. Now he thought to ask, "Why the *Flaming* Fandango Brothers?"

Waley had somehow gotten it into his head that Bullock was the dummy half of a ventriloquist act and directed his reply to

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Winnie. "Their big finale involves fire-eating and flaming baton twirling. Never cared for stilts, myself. Heights give me the willies." Then he gave Winnie a mock shoulder punch. "Well, wish me luck. I've got a lot riding on this show."

"The insurance premiums must cost you a fortune," said Bullock, starting his palm-reading spiel.

"No time for stupid parlor games," the furrier told Winnie and veered off in another direction.

No, indeedy, Bullock told himself, he wouldn't be unhappy if Waley turned out to be Mr. Big.

Mountie and bear picked their way through the lighting equipment and television cables, heading for the employee's lunchroom in the basement where the fashion models hung out. Bullock needed someone to leave Winnie with. The models always made a fuss over the bear, the lucky dog!

On the way, they passed the stage erected for the show. It had a long ramp that sloped down to the floor, with a seating area for the invited guests on either side.

The broadcast wouldn't be until two, eight in the evening Paris time. But backstage the early makeup people had set up their tables and mirrors and begun the long task of getting the models ready. Dressers were laying out the elaborate hats decorated with papier mâché buffalo, beaver, sailing ships, cod, stooks of grain, sunbursts, fleur-de-lis, Union Jacks, and mountains and islands representing Canada's provinces and territories for the Parade of the Provinces finale, at the end of which Bullock and Winnie stood before a Canadian flag set aflutter by an offstage floor fan and gave a farewell salute.

The lunchroom was empty except for Tabou, Bullock's favorite among the models. The green-eyed brunette specialized in modeling fur muffs and hats. She always had her hands in a muff and her nose in books with daunting titles like *Whither the Balkans?* or *Whence the Twenty-first Century?* Tabou belonged to Beauties Without Borders, informed models and starlets working for peace and the environment. Movers and shakers liked to be seen with pretty women on their arms. Beauties Without Borders members let these men wine and dine them. In return they got to express their position on the ozone level or ICBMs.

Today Tabou was pale with worry. "It's Kamchatka." (Strawberry-blond Kamchatka, a recent arrival from Vancouver, had been the loudest voice against paying "extortion money" to the House of Sprat. "Night-fat insurance, who needs it?" she had demanded yesterday. "I jog. I exercise.")

"This morning Kamchatka came into the locker room looking all puffy. I watched her weigh herself. Panties and bra like yesterday. She'd gained twenty pounds overnight. I weighed myself, too, in

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case the scales were on the blink. Twenty pounds, no mistake. Simoom took her home in a cab. On the way back she'll pick us all up House of Sprat contracts."

Bullock remembered the strawberry-blond doll with the plasticine hips on Sprat's dashboard. By godfrey, talk about voodoo weight-gain. But he had other fish to fry.

Leaving Winnie with Tabou, he returned to the first floor and took the stairs to the mezzanine. Wellington Kong, the fashion show's director, liked to flaunt his Sino-Canadian heritage by wearing a yellow silk jacket with black dragons on it, his forearms buried deep in the wide sleeves. Bullock grew up on Fu Manchu movies. If ever an upper lip cried out for a long thin moustache falling below the chin, it was Kong's.

Knocking on the open door of the control booth, Bullock said, "I've always appreciated China's many contributions to the modern world, sir. Noodles, gunpowder, fortune cookies. And speaking of fortune cookies . . ."

Kong glared but heard Bullock out. Then he drew his right hand from his left sleeve and presented it, palm up. The fingers were covered to the first knuckle with pointed silver and enamel tubes of the kind mandarins wore to protect their long fingernails. Just then the control-room intercom announced that the Fandango Brothers were ready to rehearse their "Singin' in the Rain" number. Kong dismissed Bullock with an imperious wave that would have done the *Yellow Peril*'s champion proud.

At the bottom of the mezzanine steps Bullock ran into Inspector Nickerson, still in civvies, deep in a glaring scarlet phalanx of Toronto Mounties, with the puzzled lobby security people on their heels.

As they came out from under the mezzanine, Waley hobbled over to demand, "What's going on here?"

Nickerson waved him aside. "I'm arresting your clowns."

"But we've got a show to put on."

"Not with these clowns, you don't." Nickerson raised a portable bullhorn. "You Fandangos, come down quietly. Don't make us go up after you."

The clowns looked at each other and began rocking back and forth on their unicycles. At a signal from their leader they formed a circle facing inward and began juggling colored balls among themselves while pedaling across the stage. As they started down the runway the balls increased in number and the juggling pattern became more complicated.

The Mounties looked on, open-mouthed. It was all so wonderfully done that they stuck their weapons in their armpits so they could applaud. Then Bullock warned, "I think they're going to try to escape by the mezzanine, sir."

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"I think you're right," agreed Nickerson, watching with bright, admiring eyes.

The clowns might have gotten away, but one of them ran over the toes of a security guard as they negotiated their unicycles through a naked crowd of elegant display dummies grouped behind the seating area. The guard fired instinctively and his colleagues joined in. When the terrible fusillade ended, nothing remained but splintered stilts, arms and legs, bright bouncing balls, spinning unicycle wheels, chrysanthemum boutonnieres, and grinning, white-faced corpses.

The carnage was terrible, though much was display-dummy parts. Nickerson must have read Bullock's thoughts. "Those desperate men belonged to Los Bozos por Los Jumbos," he said, "the fanatical wing of the Latin American chapter of Circus People for the Ethical Treatment of Circus Animals. Whatever their desperate plan, we've nipped it in the bud."

Signaling his men to remove the bodies, Nickerson continued, "Oh, I spoke to your boss. No-go, the transfer, I'm afraid. LaPierre says he won't break up a winning team, you and the bear. He quoted some Russian proverb about the dumber the peasant, the better his horse understands him. Whatever that means."

Nickerson could see Bullock's disappointment. "Look," he said, "You want to be on my team? Find Mr. Big and you can write your own ticket."

Bullock managed to muster a hearty, "I'll get him to show his hand, sir." But his encounter with Kong had shaken his confidence considerably.

Turning to leave, Nickerson stopped and said, "There was something I wanted to ask you about John Cassius Sprat. But I forget what it was." He tapped forehead with forefinger, trying to remember. Then, realizing that his men had left without him, he turned pale and dashed after them.

Unsure what to do next, Bullock wasted valuable time reading the palms of the voice-over announcer and some cameramen who just happened to be standing around with their hands in their pockets.

Then Bigelow, the Precambrian Brass Quintet's French horn player, passed by heading for a smoke out behind the store. The rumpled, stoop-shouldered man always kept his right hand tucked in the bell of his instrument. Bullock followed him outside. He watched Bigelow take out his cigarettes, shake one free, and light it using his left hand.

Bullock nodded down into a hole where a hose from a large tank truck was being connected to the underground pipes. He said, "I bet if a guy came up with, say, a mixture of Velcro and asphalt the

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water company could smooth right back in place, he'd make a fortune. And speaking of fortunes . . ."

"Passionate castanets," said Bigelow at the end of Bullock's little speech. The Mountie was about to caution the man to keep a civil tongue when Bigelow produced a pair of ivory castanets from the bell of his instrument. "Cold castanets chatter like teeth. Got to keep them warm. Appassionata."

Her cardigan pocket beeped. Leaning the leaf rake against the trellis, Heather Stairwell took out the cell phone. She recognized the voice. Ten minutes later she was standing on the broad lawn with the narrow leather case slung over one shoulder. A small helicopter came skimming over the treetops and swung down onto the grass. Holding onto her berry-colored cloche hat, Heather Stairwell exchanged smiles with the pilot in the glass bubble, a beautiful raven-haired woman with excellent high cheekbones. She was a member of the Clothes-Horse Cavalry, the enforcement arm of Beauties Without Borders. Sometimes for a firm commitment to nuclear disarmament or the rain forests a beauty might agree to stay the night. The organization's peaceful agenda notwithstanding, the Clothes-Horse Cavalry faction believed that movers and shakers whose firm commitments turned out to be mere pillow talk deserved to die. "Good afternoon, Audry dear," said the SWAK Team assassin, taking her place beside the pilot.

Back inside Putting on the Dog the pace of things had quickened. Security was bringing up the furs from cold storage, a long parade of beaver, sable, silver fox, marten, ermine, leopard, cheetah, and ocelot; and mink from near-black to silver-blue, chinchilla from deep blue to white.

Elmo Gigante, the Fur Umbrella's security chief and another of Bullock's suspects, was overseeing the operation. A short, sour-faced man of Corsican extraction, Gigante always kept the fingers of his right hand tucked in between the second and third button of his jacket in the Napoleonic style.

Bullock approached him warily. He'd heard that Gigante's height had kept him out of the Mountie Academy and that he bore a grudge against the Force. "A fortune in furs," observed Bullock. "And speaking of fortunes . . ."

Without taking his eyes off the passing furs, Gigante drew his revolver with his left hand and pointed it at Bullock's kneecap. "Buzz off," he snarled.

Bullock buzzed off. By godfrey, everybody was just too damned busy to give a Mountie career a leg up. Blast.

Tabou and Winnie were waiting in line to be made up, Tabou with her hands in a muff. Suddenly Bullock remembered that

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right after the clown slaughter, perhaps drawn by the gunfire, the model had come to the top of the basement stairs. She held her book in her right hand. Was she missing a finger or using it to mark her place? Why couldn't Mr. Big be a woman?

Bullock joined them. But for the life of him he couldn't think of another clever "fortune" segue. As Tabou took her turn at the makeup table Bullock's stomach rumbled loudly. "Sounds like Winnie's hungry," said Tabou, reaching back with a perfect right hand to scratch behind the mascot's ear. "One o'clock. Time to feed the inner bear."

By the time they'd eaten and Bullock had handed Winnie over to the costume people, the invited guests started arriving. Bullock checked them out, mink ranchers and their ladies in ten-gallon hats and tooled leather boots, international hide jobbers in impeccable evening dress and glittering diamond studs, representatives from the Brotherhood of Trappers and Coureurs de Bois in their colorful sashes, the editors of *Exotic Pelt and Plume,* and the Fur Umbrella bigwigs whose courtly smiles gave no hint that they spent part of each winter bludgeoning baby harp seals to death on the ice. Bullock studied so many right hands that his head ached from the flash of finger rings.

When the guests were seated, the quintet struck up "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody" and the fashion show began. Bullock hurried backstage to have makeup put on for his crummy little part in the finale. Afterward he stood with Winnie, who wore a yellow slicker and nor'wester and a balsa-wood boat around his waist, as the promenading models went through the curtains and reappeared to change their furs and go down the runway again.

Next came a short documentary film, *Born to Keep Us Warm,* a description of how a fur coat is made which Kong was using to replace the Fandango Brothers' act. This gave the models time to get ready for the big production number, "Fur in Foreign Parts," a clever retelling of the legendary Newfoundland fisherman John Dory's pursuit of the equally legendary cod that had eaten his leg.

As the "Fur in Foreign Parts" overture began, Winnie and the models took their places. Bullock wished the bear the traditional "Break a leg" and was ashamed he meant it. He'd really wanted that John Dory part himself. He could have played it with his leg tucked up into the balsa-wood boat and a peg on his knee. Oh, sure, for a while there when they couldn't find a slicker in Winnie's size it looked like he might get the part after all. Then they located one at Stout Cortez, a clothing store for oversized men and boys in Toronto's Latino quarter.

As Bullock mourned losing the part, Waley came limping backstage. Clearly uneasy at addressing Bullock directly, the furrier

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spoke slowly and carefully in a loud voice. "Your Inspector Nickerson just called. From what they found at the Fandango Brothers' hotel, they've pieced together the clowns' fiendish plan." He pointed up at the backstage ceiling. "Wearing their stilts, they put a powerful bomb behind one of these sprinkler fixtures. They meant to detonate it during the show, bringing the whole ceiling crashing down on the audience. An act of anti-fur violence seen all around the world."

"Good godfrey," said Bullock.

Waley nodded. "Bomb Disposal's on the way. To speed things along Nickerson wants you to locate the sprinkler head. I wrote the serial number down somewhere. Ah, here we go." Waley produced a matchbook folder from his sling and passed it to Bullock. "Just locate the sprinkler head. Leave the rest to the bomb people. You can use that stepladder over there."

As Waley limped away, Bullock rolled the tall ladder into place under a sprinkler, locked the wheels, and started up. Real Mountie work at last!

Mountie work. As he climbed Bullock mused on these words. He found himself shaking his head, remembering the utter pity he'd felt a few weeks back seeing former Constable Lloyd Dix, the Christmas-card tycoon, step from a big snazzy limo in an Italian suit, a ruby stickpin in his tie and carrying a nice little gut on him. The poor sap, thought Bullock. There but for the grace of God go I.

Bullock climbed until he was above the proscenium arch. Beneath him, Winnie was approaching a model wearing a Spanish Gypsy costume under her fur coat. As warm castanets clattered passionately, the bear tipped his nor'wester and raised a questioning eyebrow. The model gave a spirited shake of the head and stamped her feet. John Dory continued his pursuit of the legendary cod.

Now Bullock was right beneath the sprinkler head. But he'd climbed above the light fixtures, where it was too dark to read numbers. Bullock almost started back down for a flashlight. Then he got an idea. Proud of his resourcefulness, he tore a match from the folder, lit it, and held the flame and the folder up to the sprinkler head to compare the serial numbers.

Waley strode along the basement hallway toward the cold-storage area. His limp had vanished and the four-fingered right hand, freed from its sling, carried a briefcase.

Where was the phone call telling him Nickerson was no longer among the living? Yes, he'd made a bundle selling the real furs and replacing them with Dr. Fraser Douglas's wood by-product fakes. And yes, he meant to make another from the insurance

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when the fake ones were destroyed by the blood-red dye he'd pumped into the building's sprinkler system. But if Heather Stairwell had slipped up, Waley would have to forget the insurance and flee down into The Pit. He decided the money was worth a walk around the block to see if Nickerson was still on lookout across from Putting on the Dog.

At the end of the corridor Waley slid a secret panel aside and stepped into the hidden freight elevator he'd used to remove the real furs under the noses of the Fur Umbrella's security people. He sent the elevator lumbering upward. The alarm bell sounded to alert pedestrians that the metal doors in the sidewalk were opening. At street level Waley stepped out and sent the elevator back down. He walked away backwards, for it always intrigued him the way the doors folded back into the sidewalk. At the corner he collided back to back with Inspector Nickerson. When he saw who it was, Waley cursed, snatched up his briefcase, and sprinted for the subway entrance.

Nickerson had deployed his men at the store's front and rear entrances. Then he waited in a doorway across the street where he could cover his back. An alarm bell tempted him from his hiding place. He passed a clergyman deep in his prayer book at the curb and started across the street toward the noise. Suddenly Nickerson smelled a strong, strangely familiar odor. At the far curb he remembered where he'd smelled it before: on Constable Lamport's body in the shadow of Casa Loma. Spinning around and moving from side to side Nickerson frantically scanned the rooftops and higher windows in search of the SWAK assassin.

Suspended on a window washer's rig halfway down the tall office building, Heather Stairwell spotted Nickerson as he dashed into the street with the mark of SWAK on the back of his raincoat. She raised the bow for the difficult shot. As she aimed, Nickerson reached the curb and, suddenly, as if sensing her presence, he swung around and began his sideways prancing while moving quickly backwards. He collided full tilt with someone else backing around the corner.

Before Heather Stairwell could sort out the entangled bodies she was distracted by a screaming crowd of blood-red people pouring out of Putting on the Dog.

When she turned back, Nickerson was gone. "Damn!" She searched the street until her goggles found the ultraviolet paint again just as her target reached a subway entrance.

The huddled blood-red shape atop the blood-red stepladder hadn't moved since the screaming started, not even when the last drop of

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dye was sucked from the tank truck parked out behind the store and the sprinklers stopped. Perhaps he'd never come down the stepladder again. Perhaps the Mountie Academy could employ him as an object lesson in their lectures on the Mountie way. Don't bullock yourself out of a career on the Force, the instructors would warn the trucked-in cadets, rapping on the stepladder with their pointers by way of emphasis.

Bullock laughed grimly. No, he knew what must be done. He must resign. He'd buy into Sprat's Mountie operation. If he and good old Mavis sold the cottage on Black Fly Lake, got a second mortgage on their home, and talked Mrs. Fothergill, his mother-in-law, into selling her house, too, and moving in with them, maybe they'd have enough.

Why not? What Sprat had said about power was starting to sound bracing. Bullock imagined a line of nervous Mounties clutching night-fat insurance applications outside his office door while inside a wheedle-voiced Inspector LaPierre stood on the other side of the desk. Bullock, in a fancy tweed jacket, would shake his head over the man's application before wondering out loud if LaPierre knew any more Russian proverbs about peasants and their horses.

Then Bullock saw Inspector Nickerson picking his way through the blood-red debris of stained furs and overturned chairs. He started down the ladder, anxious to head off the big chewing-out by announcing his decision to leave the Force. But Nickerson spoke first. "You're getting a damn bad case of brim warp, Bullock. That Stetson's a goner."

Bullock opened his mouth to speak. But Nickerson continued, "Your plan to get Mr. Big to show his hand was a bit, let's say . . . extensive. But what the blazes, it worked. Don't worry about the dye. Rich muckety-mucks don't stain like ordinary people do. They'll clean up real good. And the models were saved by their makeup, Winnie by his weather gear.

"What's important is, you forced Mr. Big out into the open. And we got him. Well, actually, one of his own assassins did. Anyway, he was carrying folders on his key people. We're rounding them up. The quilt of crazies unravels as we speak."

Before Bullock could interrupt, Nickerson asked, "About this Sprat guy, did John Cassius have a lean and hungry look?"

"You can say that again."

Nickerson nodded. "So did Leonard Lancaster, aka Lanky Lancaster, back when I was with Bunco. He worked an overnight-weight-loss scam using twin sisters."

Bullock blinked. Kamchatka had a fat twin?

"So now he calls himself Sprat," said the inspector. "And he calls

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what he sells night-fat insurance. Well, we call it extortion and we're shutting him down."

Nickerson jabbed Bullock in the wet tunic. "And how about this for brass? With Syngh on the fit-and-trim warpath Sprat figured on hawking night-fat insurance to the Force. Remember ex-Constable Lloyd Dix, he of the Corinthian boots? He was going to play Fatty. And his twin brother Floyd, who's still on the Force but won't be for long, he was going to be Skinny."

Nickerson looked at the condition of Bullock's uniform and shook his head. "Let's duck the TV cameras and pop out by the back." Leading Bullock away, he asked, "Hey, did you know Floyd was Madame Swami?"

Madame Swami's Crystal Glimpses into Your Future was a popular tent at the Mountie Winter Carnival. Bullock had always admired Madame Swami's silver robe and dunce cap decorated with stars and comets.

Nickerson nodded. "Yes. And I hear he got the boys pretty worked up at last year's event with all the night-fat his crystal ball saw in their future. Apparently all Sprat and the Dix brothers needed was some dumb lug to front for them. Well, we've put the kibosh on their scheme."

Bullock sighed as his future with the House of Sprat came tumbling down. Well, there was still the Force. "You promised me a place on your team, sir," he reminded the inspector.

"And you've got it," laughed Nickerson, "if you still want it. Look, here's the deal. The Disney people were impressed with Winnie in the John Dory part. They just talked the commissioner into loaning them the bear for a two-movie deal: First, they want to fix him up with a furry prosthesis for a remake of *Winnie the Pooh* using real animals instead of animation; then an all-animal *Treasure Island,* with the bear as Long John Silver. LaPierre'll tag along as handler and Force liaison. I hope he doesn't go Hollywood on us.

"So I'm taking over at Public Relations. (Thanks to you, they'll be mothballing the Lunatic Fringe desk for a long time to come.) It's a lateral move, careerwise, but I can use the rest. I was getting a tad gun-shy. Which puts you back guarding the flower beds on Parliament Hill."

When Bullock sagged, Nickerson threw an arm over his sodden shoulder and added, "How'd you like the big one?"

"Where all the tourist buses stop?" asked Bullock.

"You've got it," answered Nickerson. "And Public Relations makes the Mountie Winter Carnival my baby. And now we're short a Madame Swami. Didn't I hear tell somewhere you do a mean palm-reading act?" ●

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A Great Dance

by John F. Dobbyn

I hadn't seen Jake Barnes for more than a handshake in three—I guess four years. It stunned me to think of that, because I truly loved the old man. It was just lack of time. There wasn't a day I wasn't on trial in one court and on call in two others.

That sounds like an excuse—especially to me. But now it was catch-up time.

I knew Jake was leaving at ten. That meant crosstown through Boston traffic in twenty minutes. I slipped a ten between two fingers and held it through the slot in the glass to the front seat of the cab.

John F. Dobbyn has a fine touch with the legal mystery. His previous stories for *EQMM* in that sub-genre employed series characters Lex Devlin and Michael Knight, an older criminal lawyer and the young man he mentors. The same formula, with different characters, is employed in this new tale, but the result is anything but a replay of the other series. Author Dobbyn combines realistic interplay between his characters with a top-notch plot. ✝

"And a dollar for every light you make—green or red."

I felt the ten slip through my fingers. An East Boston accent punctuated the grinding of the gear shift.

"Start counting."

Red and green traffic lights whipped by until they began to resemble a string of Christmas lights. For some reason, it brought me back to Christmas break of my third year of law school. I was young, pumped, and dumb enough to call blind for an interview with the lion of the criminal defense bar, James Patrick Barnes.

He gave me exactly ninety seconds. I took the first ten to introduce myself. In the second ten, he scanned my resume with a remarkable lack of fascination. That left time for one question: "Why do you want to defend a lot of guilty people, kid?"

"Everyone deserves a defense, sir. The constitution . . ."

He skidded the resume across the desk. "Does this look like a cocktail party?"

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"No, sir."

"Then let's skip what you tell your relatives around the punch bowl. Why do you want to defend guilty people?"

For the first time in an interview, I thought someone wanted the raw truth. "Because I like a good fight, sir."

The old buzzard slammed the desk. I grabbed the chair to keep from bolting.

"Get out of here, kid. This is a law office. I'm in court in ten minutes."

I was at the door when I heard him bark, "Be back in this office when you get a law degree. I'll give you a fight."

And fight we did, for five years, but always on the same side. We tried everything that could come into a criminal court. We won some that were losers, and lost some that deserved losing, but never without the best scrap a client had the right to expect.

The years rolled by like pages of a calendar in a windstorm. Within four years, my name was on the door as a junior partner, and I found myself more and more frequently pushed out onto a limb. The only thing that kept my ulcer in check was the invisible view of Jake holding the safety net below me.

The biggest hurrah of those five years was our defense of Frank Boyle, head of the New England teamsters. He'd been set up on a murder charge by powerfully connected enemies. It was front-page fodder for the five weeks of trial. It was also a case in which Jake forced me to take the leading role. We finally won it on a jury verdict after three days of deliberation.

I came into the office the next day with a bottle of champagne. I took one look at the door panel, and the floor nearly dropped out from under me. My name was off the door. I stepped into my office and found everything personal in cartons on the floor. There was not a trace of the personal bullets I had sweat over that desk. For the first time, I walked into Jake's office without knocking. I didn't even get the question out.

"You're fired, kid. You're looking for a job."

I guess I just stood there with the champagne bottle hanging inappropriately from my hand.

"You can take your things or send for them."

There was a hollowness in his voice that baffled me as much as what he was saying. "Close the door on your way out, kid."

He had his back to me. I heard him say in a hoarse voice, "Before you go, you've got a call to return in your office."

I closed the door and somehow drifted back to my phone. I called up the message. It was from the senior partner of the top civil litigation firm in Boston. I could only tune in every third word, but

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the substance of it was an offer of a junior partnership with a price tag too outrageously large to comprehend.

I went back through Jake's door for the second time without knocking.

"I don't want it, Jake."

He looked up with what looked like slightly swollen eyes.

"I know, but you better want it, kid. You're out of a job."

"That's my decision."

He stood up and shook his head. His eyes came up to meet mine.

"There is no decision. I knew you'd balk, but we both know it's the right move. I've brought you as far as I can. Go the distance, kid. Don't let me down."

I tried to argue, but nothing came out. He held out his hand. I had all I could do to take it without dissolving. I felt every gift a father could give to a son in that handshake. I think he felt it, too.

I was nearly out the door when he caught me with that powerful voice.

"Kid!"

I turned around.

"It was a great dance, wasn't it?"

A heartfelt nod was all I could get out..

In the next six years, I plowed twenty-six hours a day into the civil litigation that came across my desk in geometrically expanding complexity and dollars-at-stake. I saw less and less of Jake, not through lack of love, but lack of time. It was nearly six years to the day that I went to McDonough's Funeral Home for the wake of his wife, Mary. I knew they were close, but I never realized how close until I saw what two years of Mary's decline under cancer had done to him. The old dark-blue serge hung on him like a hand-me-down from a man twice his size. The bright light was misted in those blue eyes that had pierced like laser beams.

We hugged, and I sorely regretted the time apart.

The next day I was back in the mesh of my own cases, and before I knew it, it was another year before I gave serious thought to my friend and adopted father. It hit hard when I heard the buzz around the lawyers' bars that the old Viking had been brought down by drink.

A slight taste for the grape seems endemic to trial lawyers, but it's also a breed that has a clear sense of when one of its close circle of warriors has slipped over the edge.

I dropped by the office, but Jake was out. One thing led to another, and it was three months later when I read in the *Globe* that the mayor's son had been charged with vehicular homicide. He'd apparently left a party in South Boston under the influence. Someone was killed by a hit-and-run two blocks from the party at

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about the same time. An anonymous tip put the D.A. onto the mayor's son.

What really caught my eye was that Mayor Connoly had retained Jake Barnes to defend his son. I shouldn't have been surprised. Jake and the mayor had been close friends from childhood through their law-school days at Harvard. It was just the rumors about Jake's drinking. Then I thought, if I were in trouble, whom would I call—sober or otherwise? There was only one.

I had to be in Suffolk Superior Court on an important motion that morning. By the time I was out of the hearing, I ran into a cluster of trial lawyers who seemed delighted over some news that indicated that Jake still had the old mustard. Apparently the killing took place at two in the morning. They had young Mike Connoly in custody by four-thirty. The D.A., Mack Hensler, was at the station house to personally read him his Miranda warnings and take his confession.

I could visualize Hensler at the arraignment that morning presenting the confession like a newfound original of the Magna Carta. Without a doubt, his hunger to unseat and eventually replace his old rival, Mayor Tom Connoly, was in a feeding frenzy after that confession. What the lawyers were laughing about was that apparently Jake Barnes strode into court with a motion to exclude, quash, kill, and otherwise dispose of the confession on the grounds that young Connoly had been in no mental state to validly waive his Miranda right to remain silent. Hensler had hanged himself on his own rope. He had so effectively proven that Connoly was intoxicated at two A.M. that Jake was able to convince the court that he would not have been sober by four-thirty when the confession was signed. The confession was excluded as evidence, and the D.A. was left with only circumstantial evidence to try to hang Connoly.

That did it. I had to see Jake. I was thrilled just walking into our old offices. I was more thrilled to see Jake pacing like a tiger behind his desk with a phone to his ear. He threw me a grin and waved me into a chair. He jotted something on the legal pad in front of him and said something about meeting in twenty-five minutes before he hung up.

"You heard."

He looked ten years younger than the last time I'd seen him. "Good news travels, Jake."

He just smiled back at me, and a lot of understanding passed between us. He smacked the back of his chair the way he used to.

"I'd love to chat, son, but this is my day."

He scooped his hat off the rack.

"Where're you going, Jake?"

He leaned over close.

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"Witness. A real gift." He nodded back at the phone. "It seems that one Carlo Peruzzo was at that same party last night."

"And . . . ?"

"Peruzzo lives out in Winthrop, close to young Connoly. He says he rode home with Connoly. Peruzzo drove Connoly's car because Connoly was somewhat in the bag. All of which means that at the time the D.A. says the homicide occurred in South Boston, Master Connoly was in the Sumner Tunnel under Boston Harbor."

He was at the door by the time I was on my feet. He turned for a quick, sad smile that said we've got a lot to talk about.

"Come back, will you, son?"

I was choked again. I was also determined. "I'll be here, Jake."

The trial date for Mike Connoly came up fast. I sat in the spectators' section behind Jake the day he put the witness, Peruzzo, on the stand. Jake led him through the preliminaries, and then gave him his head. Peruzzo looked from one juror to the other as he told of an uneventful ride to Winthrop with young Connoly. By the time Peruzzo left Connoly, it was an hour after the homicide took place according to the D.A.'s own timetable.

The judge took the morning recess before cross-examination by the D.A. When the court reassembled, the D.A. was in a flurry of consultation with his associates at prosecution table. He finally asked to approach the bench with defense counsel. I couldn't tell what was going on, but it clearly had everyone in high-C.

The judge finally sent the jury out for lunch and led both counsel back into chambers at quick march. I knew this could go on for hours, and I was due at an injunction hearing in another courtroom. Whatever it was, I knew Jake could handle it.

I got home that night in time to flip on the eleven o'clock news. I stood there frozen with chills, topcoat still on, listening to what had happened in the courtroom after the conference in the judge's chambers. According to the news account, the D.A. took Jake's witness, Peruzzo, on cross-examination and waltzed him through a complete recanting of his story. The way he told it this time, the defense had hired him to commit perjury. The whole alibi was a fraud. The final plunge of the dagger was in Jake's back. Peruzzo implicated the mayor and named Jake as the payoff man.

The judge ordered a transcript of Peruzzo's testimony to be sent to the bar disciplinary board to begin disbarment proceedings against Jake.

There was no redirect examination. Jake Barnes collapsed in the courtroom. He was rushed to the Massachusetts General Hospital with a coronary.

I got there as fast as I could, but I couldn't see him until the

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next morning, and then it was brief. I took his hand beside the bed.

"What happened, Jake?"

The eyes flickered.

"Don't believe everything you read in the papers, kid."

"I know you were set up. Who did it?"

He mumbled something like "Blindsided." Then the drugs took him back to wherever.

I called my office from the hospital and told my secretary, Julie, to put everything and everyone on hold until further notice. She said it couldn't be done. I said it could if I'd been hit by a truck. She agreed. I told her I had been. At least, it felt that way.

I was at the lock-up in twenty minutes, waiting for a guard to bring young Connoly to the lawyers' interviewing room. The cold steel and linoleum were a far cry from the plush floors and flocked walls I'd done business in since leaving Jake's good company. I wondered why it felt so good to be back.

Mike Connoly was quick enough to accept my offer to pick up the reins of his case. He was over twenty-one, but I suggested a call to his dad for his approval. He got it, and we were in business.

Beyond that, Mike was relatively useless. He remembered being at the party. He remembered seeing Peruzzo there, although he had never met him previously. He had only one drink, but the next thing he actually remembered was waking up in the lockup the following morning. The one thing he was dead sure about was having nothing to do with bribing an alibi witness.

I was on the street in fifteen minutes, walking a shortcut to the courthouse to file my appearance as counsel for the defense. The judge was good enough to set up a quick phone conference with the D.A., Hensler, to work out a schedule for continuing the trial. I pleaded for two weeks and got one week, which is what I wanted in the first place.

By the time I grabbed a quick, stand-up hot dog from a pushcart on Washington Street and checked in with my office, there was a message to get in touch with Frank Boylan. I wasn't surprised. Frank was the third of the trio of inseparables who'd grown up, in the old days, in the Irish barrio of Charlestown. The other two were Jake and the Right Honorable Mayor Connoly. They had all climbed out of the tenements of Charlestown, frequently by pulling on each other's bootstraps, and the bonds between them had never slackened.

Frank Boylan's office on Tremont Street proved the adage that a cluttered office is a sign of an organized mind. Frank was round, bald, sixty, and you can find at least one of him in every pub in Dublin. In fact, at his diminutive height, it would have been eas-

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ier to find him in a pub than behind the rambling mounds of files on his desk. His secretary was on break, so I walked in.

"Mr. Boylan. You in there?"

"Boyyo! You got my message. How's himself?"

"Holding, last time I saw him." I followed the voice till I caught sight of him behind the desk. I'd have sat, but I would have lost sight of him altogether.

"He's a fighter. You know that even better than I do, Jimmy."

It seemed funny to be actually called by my name by one of Jake's generation.

"I got something for you, Jimmy. Peruzzo came to see me this morning out of the blue. I hadn't seen him since I represented him a few years ago. He wants me to represent him on the perjury charge."

I don't know why that came as a shock. The breadbasket of Frank' s practice had for many years been the string of probability technicians, social consultants, and financial facilitators (bookmakers, prostitutes, and loan sharks, respectively) under the dominion of Don Angelo Capelli, with headquarters in the North End and a territory that ranged throughout New England. Being non-Italian, Frank Boylan was up against a glass ceiling, as they say, in terms of the level of mobster he was allowed to represent, but the practice was lucrative and dependable. In fact, it promised to pick up. The mayoral election was three weeks away, and His Honor, Tom Connoly, had promised a full strike at all levels of the mafia in what he hoped would be his next term as mayor.

"Did you take the case?"

He stood up, which didn't make much difference in his elevation. The lines on that map of Ireland he wore for a face spelled pure stress.

"You don't understand, Jimmy. I'd cut off my arm for Jake. But Peruzzo's connected all the way up to . . ." He nodded toward the North End of Boston. "I can't say no. I know where a lot of bodies are buried, so to speak, from the practice. Besides, and this has got to be between us. This never came from me. They're jumpy as cats at the top. There's a split between the big shot and his number two man that could break into a shooting war any day. If I do something that calls into question my loyalty . . ."

I thought of Jake, and what he'd do if things were reversed and Boylan needed his loyalty. I suddenly felt the need of fresh air. Boylan caught me at the door.

"Listen, Jimmy. This could help Jake."

I waited.

"If the big man, you know who I mean, has to go to war, has to . . . shed some blood on the streets of Boston to preserve the family kingdom, he could run afoul of the mayor's promise to come down

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on the mob if they so much as jaywalk. Tom means it, and they know it. The election's in three weeks. If they could do something to discredit Tom just before the election, they'd have open streets if his opponent gets in. Do you take my meaning, Jimmy?"

"Are you saying the mayor's opponent is in the pocket of Angelo Capelli?"

He shrugged his shoulders until his neck disappeared. I scanned the beads of sweat that covered his forehead clear back to the nape of his neck. He was a piece of work, this Irish minor-league *consigliere.* But he sowed the seed.

I was nearly out the door when I decided to call in an owed favor.

"I'm going to talk to Peruzzo. Where do I find him?"

There was a hesitation, but the look on my face stirred enough guilt to get it out of him.

"He lives in Winthrop."

He handed me a scribbled address.

"Jimmy, just go light on where you got it, right?"

I just smiled. "It'll be our little secret."

I needed a quick handle on the case, and the office of Matt Hensler, the D.A., was a short, brisk, head-clearing walk from Boylan's office.

He was happy to inform me that he had blood samples from the right, dented fender of young Connoly's car that matched the blood type of the victim. He also had a witness who saw the red Eagle Talon swerve down D Street in a blue-collar section of Southie and clip the elderly deceased under a streetlight as he stepped off the curb at two A.M. There was no direct identification of Mike as the driver, but Peruzzo's little flip-flop as a perjured alibi witness was probably enough to fill that square.

One bit of gold I dug out of our chat was the name of the victim. Lewis Resnick had been seventy years old at the time of his demise. He apparently left his apartment on D Street after midnight that Saturday night to cross the street to a 7-Eleven for the Sunday paper, as was his weekly habit. He barely made it off the curb. He had lived alone and had no known family. Another dead end.

I asked Hensler why he thought Peruzzo changed his story in mid trial.

"Cold feet," was Hensler's explanation. With typical modesty, he said, "When he realized I was going to pick him apart on cross-examination, he knew he'd be facing life as a three-time loser. He just quit while there was still time to make a deal."

Jake had always taught me to keep an open mind on the facts right up to the time the jury comes in. That was an option I

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couldn't afford with six and a half days left before trial. I decided to take a basic assumption as indisputable and go from there.

Assumption: Jake wouldn't bribe a witness to keep his grandmother out of the electric chair. That meant Peruzzo was lying about the perjury and his doing so opened a floodgate of questions. What brought a midlevel member of the Capelli mob into this business in the first place? It was straining coincidence to believe that Peruzzo met Connoly at that party by chance, given the bizarre string of events that followed. Peruzzo knew he'd be facing cross-examination when he took the stand, which made his about-face look the more contrived from the beginning. And if the whole sequence of events did follow a script from the outset, including the hit-and-run death of Mr. Resnick, who wrote the script?

Jake once said, "When a hunch is the sum total of your options, ride the hunch like it was proven fact, and see who blinks."

If Mr. Resnick's departure from this earth was part of a deliberate plan, my first move in playing catch-up ball was to find out who Mr. Resnick was in life. My years with a high-stakes litigation firm had put me in touch with a select breed of private investigator who can do more than track errant husbands.

I reached Steve Casey at his club in Wellesley. The location suggests expensive, which is true. He is also worth every dime he charges, and more. I laid out my needs, and the fact that I had to have the information by ten that evening. Any other investigator would have laughed. Steve just raised the rates.

I hung by the phone through the evening until Steve called about nine-thirty. It seems that the deceased was, in Steve's words, a gnome who lived in a row-house in Southie for the better part of his life. Nothing seemed to distinguish him from a hundred other elderly gentlemen chewing a cigar on the front stoop on any summer's evening.

My heart was sinking at the thought of another dead end, when Steve earned his fee.

"On the other hand, Jimmy, would it brighten your youthful countenance to know that in his will he bequeathed the controlling stock in a chain of dry-cleaners, four restaurants, a string of auto dealerships, and about six other random businesses around this Bay State?"

"Steven, my youthful countenance will grin from ear to ear if you can tell me who's named in the will."

"One legatee. Try Francis Augustus Angelino."

"Could we be talking Frankie Angelino?"

"We are indeed. Are you grinning, James?"

I sucked in one deep breath and went for the gold.

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"Are we talking the inconspicuous, apparently unconnected son-in-law of Don Angelo Capelli?"

"The same. Are you grinning now, James? You should grin now, because tomorrow you'll get my bill."

"Let's face one disaster at a time. I hear some tumblers clicking into place here. Tell me if this scans. We know all of the families are pouring dirty money into legitimate businesses. I assume the Capelli family is no exception. They need a parking lot for the ownership of the straight businesses, some clean name that would obscure the fact that your friendly dry cleaner is the mob. They pick your gnome, Mr. Resnick, and put all the legitimate stock in his name. Their insurance policy in case he dies of natural or other causes is Resnick's will. Does that work?"

"Superbly, James."

"Then if Don Angelo's second-in-command is getting frisky, Mr. Resnick becomes an important pawn in the game. Whoever owns Resnick owns a sizeable empire."

"So it would seem."

"You're very agreeable, Steve. Let's see if I can get some mileage out of your expensive findings."

It was midnight when Carlo Peruzzo climbed the steps to his Winthrop duplex. I was sitting in the dark at the far end of the porch. I let him get the key in the lock before breaking the silence.

"Carlo!"

The shock spun him against the wall, and his right hand instinctively went for the inside of his coat. When it came up with nothing, I knew he was unarmed. I started to breathe again.

His first words that weren't curses amounted to an inquiry as to my identity.

"I'm the one who can keep you alive, maybe even through the end of the month. Sit down."

His instinct was to come for me. I kept it calm and controlled. My trump card was that he couldn't see me in the dark. For all he knew, I was leveling a howitzer at the knot in his tie.

"Sit right where you are, Carlo. In the light."

I could see him squinting into the darkness for the glint of a gun barrel. He was off balance, and I desperately wanted him to stay that way.

"When you sit, I talk. These could be the last words you'll hear."

He had no idea of what I meant by that. I wasn't sure either, but he sat.

It was like having a personal audience with the Pope, in one sense only. You may get one chance in a lifetime. After that, it's all "I shoulda said . . ."

"Relax, Carlo. You look tense. I'm sort of on your side."

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"Yeah? Why do I need you?" I'm leaving out some of the more colorful words.

"To stay alive. Let's discuss a recent murder on D Street in South Boston."

If I shook him, it was imperceptible.

"Yeah? Who got whacked?" He said it the way you'd ask who was pitching for the Red Sox tonight.

"Lewis Resnick."

That didn't exactly knock his socks off either.

"Oh yeah. That guy in Southie. Maybe you ain't heard. The mayor's kid is going down for that one."

It was clearly time to take my best shot before the momentum swung completely to his side. I was relying partly on fact and partly on guesswork to fill in the missing pieces—but the guesswork was prepped by years of tutelage at Jake's elbow.

"This is going to be a brief conversation, Carlo. Just so you know where I'm coming from, I'm going to share a little family business. Resnick was a straw man for the Don. The family put an impressive amount of cash into stock in Resnick's name. The insurance policy against Resnick's getting frisky with the stock was a will leaving it all to someone the Don could trust."

The supercilious smirk had dropped off. I had his attention. My guess was that when Carlo was sent to dispatch Resnick, he was told no more than necessary. My hunch was apparently on key. He knew this wasn't street gossip. I had to have this from high up inside the family. I kept it in low key.

"Things got shaky, Carlo. The Don is looking at a civil war with one of his capos. You have ears. I'm sure you know who I mean. The Don probably didn't share this with you, but he was afraid Resnick was going into the camp of the opposition. That's when you got the call to kill two birds—Resnick and the mayor's chance of reelection. You drug the kid at the party, then whack Resnick with Connoly's car on the way to Winthrop. You insure Connoly's conviction with that recanted alibi and lay the bribery on the mayor. To that extent, we found you reliable. Then you went sour."

He was stone silent. He just looked at me with eyes that showed something between fear and panic.

"Before he died, Resnick made a second will. He left everything to another gnome who's in the pocket of the Don's aforesaid treasonous capo. You know why he did that, Carlo?"

He was now clearly over his head, which was hanging forward with his mouth slightly open.

"He did it because someone tipped him off that he was going to be whacked. Who could that have been, Carlo?"

The second-will business was, I'm afraid, a total lie. But the

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sweat that was now staining his collar told me to press the advantage.

"More to the point, Carlo, who do you suppose the Don believes tipped him off—you and the Don being the only ones who knew about your mission?"

Now Carlo really wondered who I was and what I was there for. I could read the panic in his face. He started to get up.

"Sit down, Carlo. I'm still speaking. You'll know when I'm through."

He sank back like a man who expected death at any moment.

"Why did you do it, Carlo? Why did you tip off Resnick?"

The floodgates opened.

"I never did. I never told him nothin'. The Don has to believe that. I've got to talk to him."

"You're talking to me now, Carlo. I'm the one you have to convince. Why didn't you follow the plan?"

"I did! I did everything the Don told me."

Sweat pasted his hair to his forehead. He started rubbing his palms on his knees. I kept my voice low and calm.

"Not everything, Carlo."

He was in open panic. He seemed oblivious to the fact that we were on an open porch.

"What do you mean? I did Resnick with the kid's car."

"We're satisfied with that. That's not everything."

He was on his feet starting forward.

"Stay in the light, Carlo." He froze on the spot and lowered his voice.

"I called in the tip to the police. Like the Don said, I gave the kid a phony alibi. Then I flipped on the alibi. Nobody told me nothin' different."

He had just taken young Connoly off the hot seat. I was halfway there. I was as sweaty as Carlo when I made the plunge for the touchdown, but I couldn't let it show in my voice.

"The Don was displeased that you laid the bribery on the attorney, Barnes. That wasn't part of the plan. That could be trouble for the Don."

The river flowed. "I thought it would make it more believable if I said the lawyer set it up. So what? What does the Don care about an old lawyer? It worked."

That wasn't all that worked. My heart was pounding so hard I hoped it wasn't drowning out Carlo's voice on the recording machine I had strapped to my chest. I had all I could do to keep my voice from breaking.

"You've said your piece, Carlo. I want you to stand up now and go in the house. You'll be hearing shortly."

I didn't say from whom. I'm sure Carlo thought I meant the

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Don. Actually, I meant the district attorney. In any event, he went into the house, and I slipped off the back end of the dark porch.

I made two copies of the tape recording in the car on my way back to the city. I dropped off one copy with the midnight-oil burners in the district attorney's office, together with a promise to testify as to its authenticity. More important from my point of view, I was in time to get the second copy to the City Editor of the *Boston Globe* in time for the morning edition.

The cabbie swung to the curb and skidded to a stop. He flipped down the flag and proudly barked, "Thirty-two." I knew he was announcing the number of traffic lights he'd made. I also knew that half of them were red. I hate to reward crime, but I paid him double the offer, since I could see that we had gotten there before Jake left.

I scrambled up the steps. I had the morning edition of the *Boston Globe* under my arm. The lead story across the top of page one was Jerry McCann's, telling of newfound evidence connecting the killing of Resnick to the mob, exonerating young Connoly and the mayor, and, most important, clearing Jake's name of bribery and perjury.

I walked into the room just as they were saying the last decade of the Rosary. I waited while the standing-room crowd left for the church. Tom McDonough, the funeral director, gave me a few moments alone with Jake.

There was so much I hadn't said, and now I didn't know if he could hear me.

I tucked the *Globe* under his arm. It seemed to rest there as if he were taking it with him.

I said an *Ave* for the greatest soul I'd come close to on this earth, and I started to leave. I thought I heard a voice, but maybe I was just recalling something Jake said to me a long time ago. This time I could answer him.

"You bet, Jake. It was a great dance." ●

NOTE TO READERS: *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* is now on the Web! In addition to excerpts of upcoming fiction, our page provides a short history of the magazine and a list of *EQMM*'s many awards. We share the site with *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* and *Mystery Scene Magazine,* and links have already been established with several other mystery pages. It's *the* web site for mystery fans: Don't miss it! Visit us at http://www.mysterypages.com

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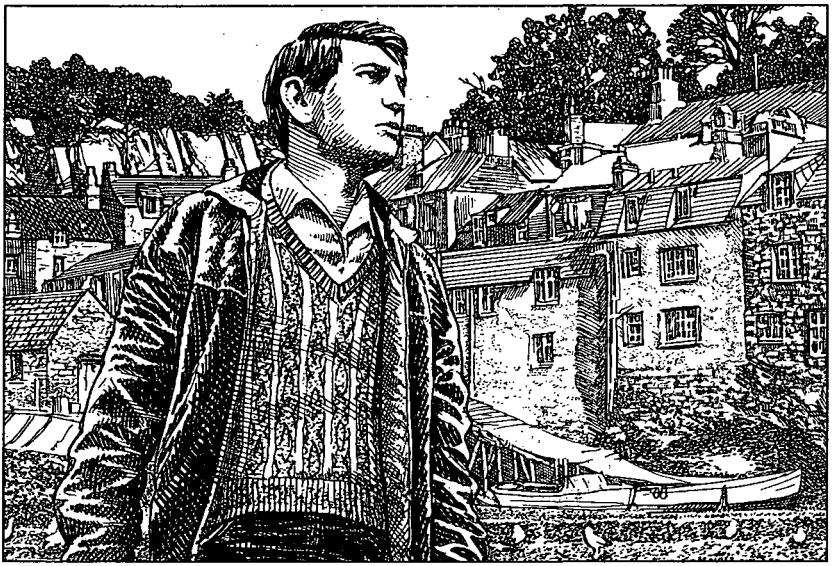

Art by Allen Davis

DIMINISHED RESPONSIBILITY

by Martin Edwards

It was as if she had never existed. As Huw walked along the seafront, he could hear laughter spilling down from the balcony of the Yacht Club. Down on the sands, kids playing beach cricket kept squealing with delight. On the benches that lined the promenade, old men and women were exchanging gossip or dozing in the afternoon sun.

She's dead! he wanted to shout. *Don't any of you care?*

But he knew his words would be blown away by the salty breeze. Even if anyone did hear, they would treat him to a pitying glance and then look away. During the holiday season, every resort attracted its share of eccentrics. He glanced over to the pier and caught sight of a tramp staggering past the amusement arcade. So he was still around, was he? In his mind, Huw could hear Ceri mocking the old drunk and his inability to hold his alco-

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hol. The truth was, she'd never been much good at caring herself.

He swore. Only five minutes since he'd jumped down from the train and already it was as though he'd never left. He hadn't been blind to her faults, although during last year's long summer he'd dreamed of her night after night. She used to complain that he was always getting at her, trying to turn her into someone she was not. Now she would never change.

A woman with two children in a double pushchair said, "You ought to watch your language when there are kiddies about."

Crime novelist, reviewer, anthologist, Martin Edwards has made quite a career for himself in the eight short years since he made his John Creasey Award-nominated debut in mystery fiction. What is most amazing is that he has done all this while also pursuing a full-time career as a solicitor in the north of England. He usually writes about a solicitor-sleuth; but this non-series tale takes place on holiday in Wales.

He felt himself going red and might even have mumbled an apology but she gave him a hard stare and pushed her infants through a gap in the traffic tailing back from the roundabout. He watched the small, round, ice-creamed faces as the buggy crossed the road and wondered about Dylan. What was he like, the baby he had never seen? Huw realised that his mouth was dry. Of course it had been a mistake to come back here. Alun had been right. He should have let sleeping children lie.

Alun Northop's flat was at the end of a shabby terrace which ran off the Marine Drive. Huw rang the bell and when there was no answer pressed it again, long and hard.

A window on the top floor opened and a head of dark, tousled hair poked out. "All right, all right. Give us a chance, will you?"

"Heavy night, was it?"

Alun wiped a hand across his fleshy lips. "Must have drunk a bad pint. When I rang in sick this morning, I wasn't kidding the boss—for once. I tell you, boy, I've been throwing up ever since I got home."

Huw couldn't help grinning. "It's good to know some things never change."

"Listen, smart-arse, you want to spend the night on the beach? I don't have to let you sleep here, you know."

"Yeah, I know."

"I only said yes 'cause you sounded so pathetic on the phone. Told you it was a crap idea."

"Are you going to let me in or not?"

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"Hang on a minute while I find my pants."

As he waited, Huw asked himself what Ceri had ever seen in Alun. He'd put the question to her once, emboldened by a five-minute fumble in a corner of the car park of the ex-servicemen's club. She'd simply said, "Oh, same stupid reason as people climb Cader Idris. Because he was there."

The door swung open. Alun had thrown on a purple vest and Levi's and was still wiping the sleep from his eyes. He gave Huw's bulging rucksack a suspicious look. "Anyone would think you're planning to stop till the season's over."

"No fear. I'll be gone in a day or two."

"Perhaps we should be honoured that you're putting in an appearance at all."

Alun led the way up the narrow stairs and pointed at a tiny box-room almost filled by a narrow folding bed which smelled of damp.

"Sling your stuff there if you like." A throaty chuckle. "Seen the kid yet?"

Huw shook his head. "I only just got here."

Alun bared his teeth. "Who'd have thought it? The college boy's a daddy. Hee-hee. Bet you got the shock of your life when she told you."

"You're not wrong." He tried to sound matter-of-fact about it, but he could still remember the feel of the sweat, cold on his brow, as he'd read her scrawled postcard. *By the way, I'm pregnant.* He'd rung her in a panic and she'd laughed when he'd asked her what she intended to do.

"You never know," she'd said, giggling. "I might just keep it. Could be a stroke of luck. The council will have to find me a decent flat."

He'd known better than to argue, to try to talk her into having an abortion. She was contrary by nature. If he left her alone, she'd see sense. Her sister Nerys had her head screwed on the right way and would surely talk her round. He'd decided to keep his distance till she made up her mind. It wasn't cowardice, he told himself: After all, she knew where to find him if she needed to. He couldn't abandon his studies, couldn't contemplate a disappearing act. Instead, he had stayed in Birmingham during the vacation as well as in term time, keeping his head down, clinging to the hope that she wouldn't ruin everything for him.

As time had passed, he'd persuaded himself that she must have had a termination. There had been no word, nothing at all until he'd read in the paper about the murder of a girl called Ceri Jones in a small Welsh seaside resort. He was still struggling to absorb the possibility that she might be dead when a policeman had called on him and told him there was no mistake. He'd even been asked to provide an alibi. That was no problem: He'd spent the

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night of the killing behind the bar in a city-centre pub, putting to use the experience he'd gained here, working in the Edelweiss throughout the summer. But when the policeman told him that Ceri had given birth to a baby boy on April Fool's Day, Huw's legs buckled beneath him and he needed to cling on to the back of a chair for a support.

"Nerys is looking after it for the time being, I hear."

Huw nodded. "I need to talk to her."

"Not rung her yet, then?" Alun grinned. "Can't say as I blame you. She's a dragon, is Nerys. I wouldn't swap places with that husband of hers. Mind, he's only himself to blame. It's all very well buying and selling antiques. But why did he want to marry one?"

Huw heaved his rucksack onto the floor beside the folding bed. "Did the police talk to you about the murder?"

" 'Course they did." A curious note, almost of pride, rang in Alun's voice. "They spoke to all Ceri's old flames."

"That must have kept them busy."

Alun snorted with laughter. "You're not wrong. I told them straight. It'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack, I said, if you think Ceri was killed by one of her exes. She must have shagged half the fellers who live here. To say nothing of the tourists and the summertime casuals like you. Plenty of motives for murder there, I shouldn't wonder. Let's face it, she didn't believe in letting a lad down gently, did she?"

For a moment his face darkened and Huw remembered how Ceri had disparaged Alun's sexual prowess. But Alun was right: So many of them were in the same boat. God alone knew what she'd said about *him* to the security guard from the pier, the fellow who had picked her up one night when she was at a loose end because Huw was on late turn at the Edelweiss.

"It's no reason to kill."

"Not everyone thinks like a college boy," Alun said. "The guy didn't just cut her jugular vein, you know. He drove the broken glass into that lovely face of hers. They reckon she was unrecognizable."

He seemed to savour the last phrase as he rolled it off his tongue. His lips had formed in a kind of gloating half-smile and Huw felt suddenly cold. Scrounging a favour from Alun had been a mistake: It would have been better to sleep in the dunes. How could he ever once have regarded this man as a friend? Chance had thrown them together. They had met in Huw's first week at the Edelweiss when Alun had turned up in the bar one night to flirt with the fat chambermaid he'd started screwing after Ceri dumped him. Nightlife in the resort was scarcely exciting. The Dixieland Show Bar on the pier and the pubs and clubs in the

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backstreets were as exotic as it got. The two couples had gone out together as a foursome a few times until Ceri decided that the fat chambermaid was so ugly that she couldn't bear to be seen in her company anymore. After that, Huw and Alun had sunk a few pints together watching satellite sports programmes on afternoons when the girls were working and Alun, a milkman, had finished his round. Huw was glad to escape from the Edelweiss and Alun relished the chance to explain again and again how his teachers had urged him to go to college, but he'd preferred to study in the university of life. Yet they'd had nothing in common except for a taste for beer and the fact that they'd both slept with the same girl. A year on, it simply wasn't enough.

"How much do you know about what happened?"

Alun gave him a cagey look. "Same as everyone else. No more, no less. Seems like she brought some bloke back to her new flat and they had a fall-out. It ended up with him shoving a broken bottle in her throat and doing a runner. Nerys came round and found Ceri bleeding to death on the kitchen floor. By the time the ambulance arrived, she was a goner."

Huw flinched. "And the bloke? Not the patrol guard from the pier?"

"Christ no, he disappeared the minute he heard she was in the club. Apparently she'd been out to the Harbour Arms for a drink. To get away from the sound of the kid screaming for half an hour, or so she told the lad at the bar. Her flat's only five minutes away, just down the road from where Nerys and Gwynfor live. On her way back she must have met someone and invited him back for a leg-over. Simple as that."

"But *why* did he do it?"

"Search me. Maybe she had second thoughts about him."

"They never made it to the bedroom?"

"Not the way I hear it. Unlike our Ceri, I must say." Alun chortled. "Maybe it was her hormones playing her up. Women can be an absolute bugger after they've had a kid, or so I hear from my mates who are married."

"So the police don't have a clue who it was?"

"Like I say, they're spoilt for choice. But if you ask me, they'll never find him." Alun smiled. It was almost, Huw thought, as if he admired the killer's achievement in evading justice.

"I'd better be going," he said curtly.

"Good luck with the dragon. Fancy going out for a pint or two this evening?"

"I may be back late."

"Suit yourself."

Huw slammed the front door behind him. He tried to imagine Ceri's heart-shaped face, but the effort defeated him. *They reck-*

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oned she was unrecognisable. The words had lodged in his brain: He sensed that it would be a long time before he was able to evict them. For a while last summer he had loved her—or, at least, thought himself to be in love with her. Years ago, his dad had told him that sex wasn't everything in life, but it had taken the affair with Ceri to persuade him of the truth of the old man's warning. He felt hot with embarrassment whenever he recalled his dreams of marriage and setting up home with her in the resort where she had been born and bred. The fantasy had faded with the heatwave; her sulky brand of selfishness had become a bore even before she'd tired of him. She'd always looked good and he'd felt proud to be seen around with her, but if it hadn't been for her hungry inventiveness in bed, he'd have dropped her weeks before she succumbed to the temptation of a knee-trembler under the shadow of the pier. Perhaps, he thought as he headed past the lifeboat station, they had been made for each other in one respect alone: They'd both been equally selfish.

The antiques shop was tucked underneath a cliff at the far end of the Marine Drive. An old-fashioned doorbell jangled as Huw stepped inside. As usual, there was no one around and it looked as though none of the spindly-legged chairs or cracked mirrors had seen a duster since the start of the summer season. Perhaps Gwynfor laboured under the misapprehension that a layer of dust created an atmosphere of period charm. Huw heard a cough and a shuffling of feet before a thin face peered round a bead curtain at the back of the shop.

"With you in two ticks . . . Oh! It's you!"

"Hello, Gwynfor."

Huw hadn't expected Gwynfor Thomas to bring out the fatted calf, but he wasn't prepared for the way in which the other man's eyes widened in horror, as if he'd been greeted by the Grim Reaper.

"What—what brings you here, Huw?"

"I had to come, didn't I? Once I heard about Ceri."

"Yes, yes. Of course. It's—it's been a dreadful business." Gwynfor mopped his brow. He was in his mid forties, a balding cardigan-wearer with the pale, pasty skin of a man who had spent most of his life indoors, dodging the sun for which the town was famous. He sucked in his cheeks, as if in an effort to recover his composure. "Come through, come through. Can I offer you a cup of tea?"

"Thanks." Huw followed the older man through the bead curtain.

The walls of the back room were covered in newspaper cuttings. Each had a headline which was a variant upon the same theme: *Did a Welshman Discover America?*; *Madoc's Journey—Truth or*

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Legend?; *The Prince Who Found the New World.* There was a likeness of a medieval warrior standing on the prow of a ship, a photograph of Gwynfor poring over an atlas.

"Excuse the mess," Gwynfor said as he put the kettle on.

Huw remembered asking Ceri about her brother-in-law one time when Nerys had invited him around for supper. She'd described Gwynfor as a man who never stopped apologising. He'd started to say sorry at the slightest provocation years ago; in an attempt to soothe Nerys whenever she was on the warpath. Now it had become a habit he simply could not break. Once he'd met Ceri's sister, Huw could sympathise with Gwynfor's willingness to do anything that might staunch the constant flow of complaints. He could even understand why Gwynfor, who liked to style himself an antiquarian, increasingly sought refuge from the reality of married life in elaborating upon the old theory that a seafaring Welsh prince had crossed the Atlantic three centuries before Columbus and established a colony in Alabama.

"No problem." He perched on a chair. "Still busy with your researches, I see."

Gwynfor gave a light laugh. "Had a bit of a breakthrough recently. Some of the fellows in the Society have been checking up on Native American construction methods. There's an extraordinary resemblance to the techniques developed here during the Middle Ages. It would be facile to dismiss it as a coincidence. Absolutely facile."

The words came out quickly, as if he was desperate to keep talking, to keep the conversation away from more dangerous waters. Huw couldn't help remembering a moment during that tedious supper when he'd caught the older man watching Ceri. She'd been wearing a top that revealed her flat brown midriff and her brother-in-law had been studying her figure as if it were the very ship in which Prince Madoc had sailed over the ocean. Gwynfor had caught his eye and blushed. Huw hadn't reacted: Listening to Nerys as she scolded Ceri about some trivial misdemeanour that was none of her business, he couldn't find it in his heart to blame Gwynfor for letting his imagination roam.

"Uh-huh."

Gwynfor coloured. "Sorry. I still let my enthusiasm run away with me, you'll notice. But really, first things first. How are you?"

"I'm fine. More to the point, how are you and Nerys? And the baby?"

"Ah. The baby. Yes." Gwynfor coughed. "Dylan, his name is, actually."

"Oh yes. Of course. Is he okay?"

Gwynfor licked his lips nervously. "He's a marvellous little chap. And Nerys is so good with him. So devoted. You'd never think . . ."

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"I'm sure Nerys has been great." Huw could remember Ceri laughing about her elder sister's devotion to children and saying that there was no way *she* ever wanted to be tied down with a squawking brat. That was before she'd weighed up the advantages of a new council flat. "From what the police told me, you've both been very kind."

"It was the least we could do, to take the little chap in. It helped that he was used to us, of course. Nerys often looked after him even—before Ceri died."

"I can't picture Ceri as a mother, somehow."

"No, well. It doesn't always come naturally, does it?"

The words *mustn't speak ill of the dead* hung over them like a cloud of dust. Huw cleared his throat and said, "I didn't even realise there was a baby. Not till the police told me. Ceri did say something on a postcard about being pregnant, but to tell you the truth, I thought she was winding me up. It's not as though I refused to have anything to do with—Dylan."

"It's understandable," Gwynfor said. "You must have been busy at university. Other things on your mind apart from infants, eh?"

The kettle whistled, and as Gwynfor poured the tea into old mugs bearing Plaid Cymru slogans, Huw found himself starting to relax. This wasn't as bad as he had feared. He'd come here first deliberately, hoping to get an idea from Gwynfor how Nerys would react to his arrival on her doorstep. The previous night he'd dreamed of her bundling the child into his arms and telling him to face up to his responsibilities for once in his life. It had taken all his courage to catch the train this morning. But perhaps it wouldn't be so bad after all. They might be able to work something out that wouldn't ruin his life. Or Dylan's.

"Milk and sugar? Here you are. Yes, er, I suppose there's one other thing that must have gone through your mind."

"What's that?" Huw tensed again.

"I'm sorry. I don't know how to put this delicately. But let's talk man to man, shall we?"

Huw took a sip and frowned: partly because the tea was too sweet, partly because he found it hard to imagine talking man to man with Gwynfor. What was coming?

Gwynfor took a deep breath. "You must have been wondering—I mean, whether the child is yours. Well, I can reassure you. Nerys cross-examined Ceri when she told us she was pregnant. No barrister in court could have questioned her more closely, I promise. But Ceri was adamant. While the two of you were together, she never went with anyone else."

Huw gaped at him. The idea that he might not have been the father of the child had never occurred to him. Had it done so, he

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would probably have clung to it, hoping to be spared the fatherhood that he had never wished for.

Gwynfor misunderstood his reaction and patted him on the arm. "And believe me, once Dylan was born, no one could doubt who he took after. He has your hazel eyes, the same red hair."

Thanks a million. Huw sighed and finished his drink. "We need to talk about things like money."

"Listen," Gwynfor said, a note of urgency entering his voice, "you're not to worry about finance. For as long as the little chap stays with us, we'll take care of everything. No, don't say a word. It's our pleasure."

There was a strange pleading look in his eyes. Huw said quietly, "I hear that Nerys found Ceri."

Gwynfor bent his head. "Yes. It was very hard. I know they didn't get on too well. But all the same, even though we've lost Ceri, at least we still have Dylan to remember her by."

Huw mumbled, "I don't know what to say. You've been very good, you and Nerys. I owe you both a lot, I reckon. After all, I've two years of my studies still to run and I never even told my parents about Ceri—or Dylan. I mean, I can hardly take a little boy back with me."

"You don't have to," Gwynfor said, almost in a whisper. "Listen, Nerys and I could never have kids. She had a hysterectomy even before we were married. She was only twenty-three. Looking after Dylan—it's brought something fresh into her life. Something she's longed for all these years."

It struck Huw that perhaps the arrangement suited Gwynfor very well. If Nerys was busy with the child, she would have less time to devote to bullying her husband. But so what? For himself, too, it was a gift. The perfect solution to the problem that had tormented him ever since the visit of the police. It wasn't as if he was abandoning the child to an uncertain fate. Dylan would never want for anything whilst he was in Nerys's care.

"Well, if you're sure . . . "

"I've never been surer."

"I'd better go over there now, don't you think? Talk to Nerys face-to-face. And see the baby."

"Yes, of course. Mind, the little fellow is usually asleep at this time of the afternoon, put that's not a problem. When he's awake, you never get Nerys's undivided attention these days."

Huw did not relish the prospect of being the recipient of Nerys's undivided attention, but he said thanks for the tea and made his way back along the seafront in the direction of the Thomases' house. From the bandstand on the clifftop came the strains of selections from *Oklahoma!* interspersed every now and then with gentle applause from a small audience of geriatrics. Down on the

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beach, roars of laughter came from a domed tent where puppets were performing in the regular teatime show. The smell of seaweed mingled with the aroma of real coffee issuing from a smart new cafeteria on the other side of the road.

Gwynfor and Nerys lived in a neat semi festooned with hanging baskets and overlooking the harbour. Huw rang the bell and, seconds later, heard a juvenile wail coming from the first floor followed by the sound of adult feet racing up the stairs. A minute passed, with Huw shifting from one foot to the other. Finally the door opened on a chain. A face that reminded him of a meat cleaver stared at him.

"Oh, so it's you. Gwynfor rang and told me you'd come back after all this time. You'd better come in."

She unhooked the chain and led him down the narrow hall into the sitting room. "Take the weight off your feet. How long are you here for?"

"Well, I don't know yet. I'm staying with Alun Northop."

Nerys grunted. "That yobbo. If you'd given us a ring, we could have fixed you up. Dylan's in the spare room, naturally, but there's always the sofa."

"I didn't want to be any trouble," he said, puzzled by the suggestion of hospitality, however grudging. He'd expected to be a pariah, the young man who had impregnated Ceri and then moved on without a backward glance. This was an encounter he'd been dreading. Maybe things would turn out better than he'd dared to hope. "You've been so decent already—what with Dylan and everything."

She sniffed. "It's no trouble. He's a lovely little lad, that's for sure. Better than Ceri deserved. But you'll be wanting to see him."

Huw's stomach began to churn. "Don't wake him up on my account."

"You already woke him up when you leaned on the doorbell. Come on."

The spare room had been turned into a nursery. Its walls were freshly painted in pastel shades and decorated with a frieze of Beatrix Potter animals. Dylan was lying on his back in his cot, cuddling a plastic hippo. All Huw could see was a chubby face which had been dribbling. Gwynfor had been right about the hazel eyes and the red hair. Feeling awkward, he bent over the cot and touched the child's tiny warm hand. Inadvertently, he pressed the toy hippo, making it squeak. Dylan squealed.

"Be careful," Nerys said sharply. "He's easily upset."

"Uh-huh." Huw gazed down at his son. He was uncomfortably aware that his heart should be filling with love for the small bundle of flesh and bone wrapped up in the baby clothes. Instead he

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just felt sweaty with embarrassment. Never mind the kid's big eyes and familiar tufts of hair. He was still a perfect stranger.

"He's still sleepy. We'd better leave him now."

She took him downstairs and insisted on making him another cup of tea. He decided it would be unwise as well as impolite to refuse. He was desperate to keep on the right side of her. And although she would never be the life and soul of any party, at least she had not given him a hard time so far. Ceri had often spoken of her sister's harsh temper and of how Gwynfor suffered from it. Huw had feared a tongue-lashing. Still, she might even now thrust the baby into his hands and shove them both out into the street.

"It must have been a terrible shock for you," he said cautiously after putting down his cup. Fortunately she made better tea than her husband. "When you found Ceri, I mean."

Nerys brushed a stray hair from her fringe back into place. "I heard him," she said. "I suppose you've been told that."

"The man who . . . ?"

"Who else?" She took a deep breath. "Ceri had brought Dylan round for an hour that afternoon and left his favourite teddy bear behind. Gwynfor had been busy all evening on some article about Madoc, and I didn't want to disturb him, so when I found it, I decided to nip across to their flat to return the little bear. As I knocked, I heard someone running away round the back of the building."

"Did you see anything?"

Nerys shook her head. "I didn't pay much attention. I supposed it was someone from one of the other flats, but in fact everyone in the place was out that evening. I pushed at the door. It was open and I stepped inside. I saw the blood first, then Ceri. I knelt down by her side on the floor, held her to me. But there was nothing I could do."

She stopped, and leaning over the kitchen table, put her head in her hands. Huw couldn't help stretching an arm around her shoulder. It was the least he could do. He felt her whole body trembling under his touch. "Don't talk about it if it's painful."

"Dylan was upstairs, crying," she said in a muffled tone. "I'll never forget that."

"He couldn't wish for better care than you and Gwynfor have been giving him."

She looked up at him. Her eyes were red-rimmed. "I'm glad you think that. As his father."

"Believe me, I'm very grateful."

"Well," she said softly, "what do you want to do?"

He bit his lip. "I can't cope with a young child, Nerys. I'm sorry. But there it is."

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She closed her eyes and let out a long sigh. "I thought that was what you'd say."

He waited for a moment, in case she meant to add something about the need for him to face up to his responsibilities. When she remained silent, he said humbly, "I realise I sound pathetic. But I can't pretend I feel like a father."

"No more than Ceri felt like a mother," Nerys said with a spurt of bitterness. "Or acted like one."

"We were stupid. What more can I say? I didn't mean to get her pregnant. It was a mistake."

She looked him in the eye. "We need to discuss this, the three of us. You, me, and Gwynfor."

"I suppose so." He stood up. "But first I need to go for a walk. Clear my head a bit. It's all been a lot to take in. Talking about Ceri's death—and seeing the baby."

He hurried out of the house and over the road to the harbour. Sunlight was glinting on the water. He remembered standing here with Ceri one Sunday afternoon, looking at the little boats and imagining what it would be like to sail away and leave the world they knew behind forever. He could recall slipping his hand inside her bikini top and the shriek of her laughter as she wriggled out of his grasp. He'd chased her along the beach, pounding over sand damp from a brief summer shower, before he'd caught up with her and wrestled her to the ground. They had kissed long and hard and as his tongue touched hers, he'd decided he had never been happier.

Two teenage blondes passed him and he heard someone wolf-whistle at them. Turning his head, he saw a leering man in a dirty T-shirt and frayed shorts gesturing towards the girls. It was the vagrant from the pier. Huw wondered for a moment if the pounding feet that Nerys had heard could possibly have belonged to the man Ceri had so often teased. Surely she wouldn't have invited him back home with her? But perhaps he had followed her back from the pub and then tried to force himself upon her. When she'd tried to resist, he might easily have smashed a bottle and glassed her. Perhaps he hadn't even meant to kill. He'd read somewhere that if you hit the wrong place in the neck, it was all too easy to sever a jugular vein.

Nothing could be proved, that was the trouble. Nerys hadn't seen her sister's assailant. Presumably she'd disturbed him before he could launch any sort of sexual attack. The trouble was, she'd probably messed up the crime scene as well. Although he might have had blood on him, the police didn't seem to have found anyone they could take in for protracted questioning. If there was little or no forensic evidence, the odds were that no one would ever be charged. The question then became: Would the killer strike again?

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Although the sun had begun to burn his forearms, he found himself shivering. Maybe a drink with Alun wasn't such a bad idea after all. After a couple of beers, things never seemed quite so bad. Not even, he hoped, fatherhood.

Alun was lying on a settee, his feet on a coffee table as he watched the closing overs of the Test Match on television. An off-break bowler from Glamorgan was troubling the Australian batsmen and for once it required a little persuasion to tempt Alun out to the pub.

"Bit early for you, isn't it?" he asked as he picked up his denim jacket.

"Believe me, I need a pint like I never needed one before."

"So how does it feel to be a daddy?"

"Bloody frightening."

Alun cackled as he locked his front door. "Serve you right. Should have taken precautions, shouldn't you?"

"I did. Something went wrong."

"Sure the kid's yours?"

"There's no doubt," Huw said gloomily.

Alun pondered this as they walked to the Harbour Arms. "So what are you going to do?" he asked as he beckoned the barman.

"I reckon Nerys wants to keep him. It could work out well."

Alun guffawed. "You jammy bugger. So you get off scot-free?"

"Come on. How could I take care of a baby? Nerys has got the maternal instinct. It's what she's always wanted."

"And what about Gwynfor?"

"What about him? If Nerys is happy, he'll be happy."

Alun lapped the head off his Guinness. "He fancied Ceri, you know."

"What makes you say that?"

"Surely she told you. He was always eyeing her up. Brushing against her, accidentally-on-purpose, whenever he got the chance."

"She was a pretty girl. You and I would both agree on that. Besides, if you were married to Nerys, wouldn't you fancy anything in a short skirt and no bra?"

"Maybe the kid's his."

Huw stared at his drinking companion. "You can't be serious. I told you before, Dylan's the spitting image of me. I couldn't deny I was his daddy even if I wanted to."

"Then maybe Gwynfor was jealous. I tell you, boy, he lusted after her."

"What are you suggesting? That he killed her?"

"If he didn't, who did?"

"Let's face it, Alun, it could have been anyone. You said it yourself."

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Alun gave a mischievous grin. "Sure, but there's something I haven't told you. Or anyone else, for that matter."

"What is it?"

Alun leaned towards him and spoke in a stage whisper. "The night Ceri was killed, I was walking along the front. I fancied the idea of having a jar or two here. Must have been around the time she was sitting at this very bar, downing a vodka and lime and hitching her skirt up for the benefit of anyone who might be interested, I shouldn't wonder."

"Go on."

"Well, who did I see but Gwynfor Thomas? He was skulking about in the pub car park, hands in his pockets, trying to look as if he was minding his own business. Of course, he wasn't. My guess is, he'd seen Ceri coming in here, but he couldn't pluck up the courage to make a move on her."

"So what happened?"

"As I got nearer, I reckon he caught sight of me. Anyway, he skedaddled. Nipped back home, I suppose, before Nerys caught him. I suppose he slipped out when her back was turned. Fresh pint?"

Huw lapsed into silence as they drank, turning possibilities over in his mind. "You said nothing about this to the police?"

"Why should I do their job for them? Besides, who'd believe Gwynfor could murder anybody?"

Huw finished his beer and banged his glass down on the bar. "I'd best be going."

"Already? What's up?"

"I need to talk to Nerys and Gwynfor. She said herself, there are things we need to discuss. Well, no time like the present, eh?"

Alun wagged a finger at him, not entirely in jest. "Now don't let on what I told you, eh?"

"What's the matter? Worried that Gwynfor will want to silence you?"

"Do me a favour. I'm not bothered about him. Joking apart, he'd never have had the bottle to kill Ceri and get away with it. No, it's Nerys who frightens me. I wouldn't fancy my chances if she got wind that I'd dropped her precious husband in it. If he was put away, she'd have no one to nag, would she?"

As he walked away, Huw said, "She has the baby now."

Five minutes later he was knocking at the Thomases' door.

"My head's clear now and I realise you were right," he said when Nerys answered. "There are things we need to discuss."

"Come in. Gwynfor's in the kitchen, making tea. I'm up in Dylan's room. He needs changing."

Huw wrinkled his nose as she disappeared up the stairs again. *Dirty nappies morning, noon, and night,* he thought. *How could I bear it?*

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Gwynfor looked round the kitchen door. He was wearing a pinny. "Oh, it's you. I'm making egg and chips. Want some?"

"No, thanks. I'm not in the mood for eating. I just wanted another word."

Gwynfor beckoned him into the kitchen. "Nerys tells me you seem happy with the way she's looking after Dylan."

"Sure. I can't imagine anyone better suited."

"No, she's wonderful with small children. It's a gift."

Huw rested his backside on the edge of a Formica table and inhaled the frying smells. "Do you want to adopt Dylan?"

Gwynfor stared at him, as if unable to believe his ears. "Well, there are formalities. Lots of bureaucracy, but . . ."

"I can't care for him, you know. Not like Nerys could."

"No, well, that's understandable." Gwynfor was hoarse with emotion. "We'd do everything possible. We'd keep in touch, of course. Whenever you wanted to come here . . ."

"No!" Huw said fiercely. "It's better to make a clean break. That would be the deal. It's what I thought I'd done with Ceri. Though she came back to haunt me. Does she haunt you too?"

Gwynfor coughed. "Well, she was Nerys's sister, of course. We miss her."

"Miss her!" Huw couldn't keep the scorn out of his voice. "I've heard you were hanging round the Harbour Arms the night she died."

"Who told you that?" Gwynfor had turned pale.

"You don't deny it, then?"

"I may have passed the place. I'm not sure I can recall. It is awhile ago."

"Yes, and memories fade, don't they? Same's true with Nerys. She told me you'd been at home that evening, working on a piece about your mate, Prince Madoc."

He heard footsteps behind him. Nerys had the baby in her arms, was clutching him to her bosom. She gave him an unyielding stare.

"That's what I told the police as well. Gwynfor was here all the time while I went out to take the teddy back to Dylan."

"So what with that and your story about hearing the running footsteps, he has a cast-iron alibi for the murder."

"What are you suggesting?" Gwynfor lifted the chip pan off the stove. For a moment Huw thought that he was about to have scalding fat thrown in his face. But Alun had been right: Gwynfor never had the nerve. Slowly, he put the pan down on a stand.

"My husband did not kill my sister," Nerys said flatly.

"No," Huw said. "I don't suppose he did. And even if he did, no one could ever prove it, could they? There's no chance of the culprit ever being found."

Nerys nodded. "No chance."

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"So we have a bargain, do we? You'll take care of Dylan?"

"I'd give my life to keep him safe."

Huw took a last look at his child. Something impelled him to brush the baby's head with his lips before he moved away. "I won't trouble you again. It's easier if we don't stay in touch."

Nerys's lips began to curve in something that approximated a smile of triumph. "We understand each other."

Huw nodded and then turned on his heel and walked out of the house. He was heading back for the Harbour Arms. He needed to borrow Alun's key so that he could pick up his rucksack. If he hurried, he might still manage to catch a late train. As he strode along the pavement, his mind was filled with a jumble of images. Nerys with the teddy bear in her hand, making her way over to her sister's flat whilst her husband was out and finding it empty save for a whimpering child upstairs. Ceri returning, her temper coarsened by drink and failure to pick up a man for the night. Nerys screaming with rage and contempt, Ceri mocking and defiant. Nerys picking a milk bottle up off the kitchen table, smashing it . . .

They reckon she was unrecognisable.

He paused at the traffic lights, waiting for the green signal. Suppose he said something, suppose he called the police? What would happen to Dylan then? The child would suffer. Children always did. If nothing else, he owed it to his son not to let that happen. He couldn't be responsible for depriving him of a loving home, couldn't have that on his conscience.

Besides, it was a mistake to let his imagination roam. He was probably mistaken. After all, he was tired and he'd been drinking. Nerys and Gwynfor were good people, surely. Ceri had probably been killed by the tramp from the pier. She'd been asking for trouble, only had herself to blame. How could she have abandoned her own flesh and blood?

The lights changed and he crossed the road, not daring to look back. ●

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The River's Child
BY JOAN RICHTER

A Lurking Fear
BY H.R.F. KEATING

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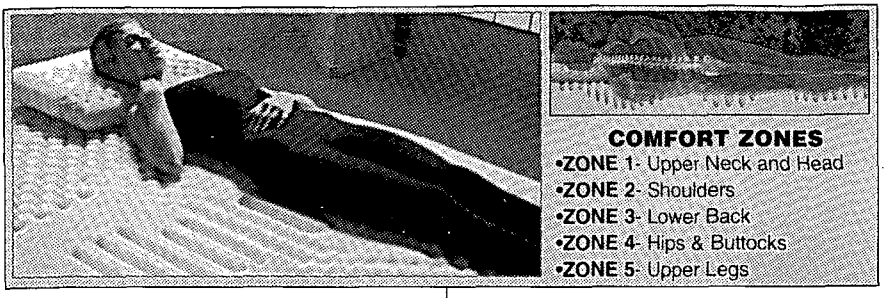
TECHNOLOGY UPDATE

"For years I had trouble sleeping restfully—now I know the problem was in my mattress!"

NatureSleep™ Platinum features comfort zones that match your body's shape and promote restful, therapeutic sleep.



Traditional mattresses leave your lower back and legs unsupported and hinder proper circulation. Even expensive waterbeds, which are supposed to distribute weight evenly, fail to support the body properly. Your spine arches downward, in a position specialists refer to as "hammocking," causing excessive strain on the back. Scientists and doctors agree that the ideal position is a neutral body posture which the different parts of the human body are supported individually and evenly. This is the secret behind NatureSleep Platinum, the revolutionary product that turns any bed into the ideal sleep surface.

Scientific solution. Anatomic Concepts, a medical products research and manufacturing company, has designed the ultimate mattress pad. Using research originally conducted for hospitals, this innovative company developed an effective, affordable way to transform any mattress into a specially-designed sleep surface that closely matches the shape of the human body. It features a patented five-zone sleep surface that holds the body in a neutral posture and redistributes pressure during sleep.

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Installs in seconds. NatureSleep Platinum fits right over your existing mattress, uses normal sheets and turns any bed into an anatomically-correct and incredibly comfortable sleep surface. The five comfort zones have been created using a computer-designed grid pattern and are engineered to accommodate people of all heights and sizes.

Risk-free. Try it for yourself, it comes with a one-year manufacturer's limited warranty and Comtrad's exclusive risk-free home trial. If for any reason you are not completely satisfied, return your purchase within 90 days for a full refund, "No Questions Asked."

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SKIN CARE UPDATE

The "hidden" problem that forces millions of women to wear pants... and the natural solution!

Formerly available only through dermatologists, this amazing cream eliminates ugly spider veins in just weeks.

by Melinda Walthington

It's estimated that half of the adult female population is plagued by spider veins! Small, thin veins lying close to the skin's surface, spider veins are red or blue in color. They may appear in true "spider" fashion, with web-like groups of veins radiating out from a central area, they can look like fine lines or appear in "starburst" clusters.

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A two-ounce jar will last from one to three months, depending on the size of the area you are treating. It can also help fade scar tissue, relieve pain and inflammation from skin irritations, or sunburns, and promote natural healing of damaged skin.

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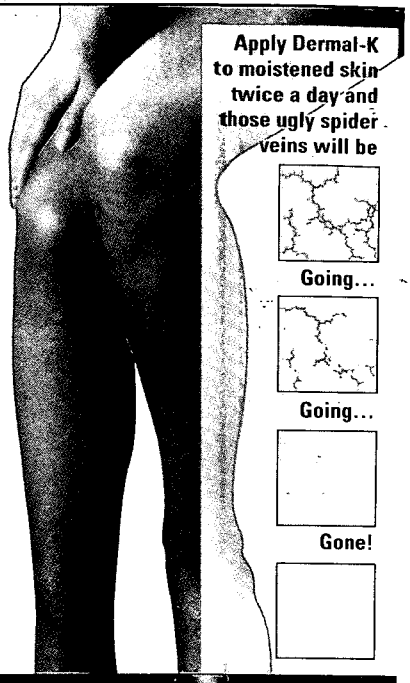

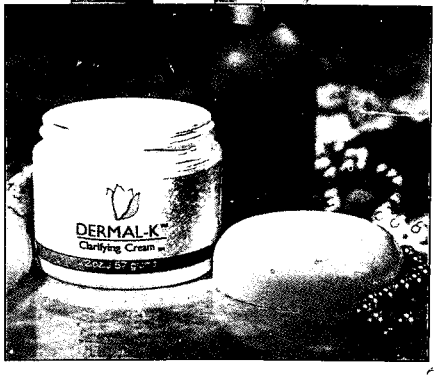

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